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DOREEN

BY

BARBARA NOBLE

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DOREEN

CHAPTER I

On her way to the office that morning, walking through streets crusted with broken glass, on legs uncomfortably swollen from a night spent dozing in a deck-chair, Mrs. Rawlings decided she would have to do it; she would have to send Doreen to the country. Things weren't getting any better, they were getting worse. Even her faith in the shelter, which up till now had had an almost fanatic quality, was shaken after last night. The shelter had rocked and her faith had rocked with it. Bombs had fallen and buildings had collapsed, and with them had collapsed Mrs. Rawlings's obstinate, angry confidence in her own invincible rightness of opinion. But for her pride, she could have wept. Life was hard enough without losing Doreen.

At this time of the morning, with an hour or more to go before the shops opened and the office staffs assembled, there were few people about in the streets and most of them were solitary women in their oldest clothes. Unconscious guardians of London's morale, the cleaners went as usual to their work. Somebody had to empty the ashtrays and waste-paper-baskets, rinse the tea-cups, flick the desks and wipe round the basins in the wash-rooms. The day's labours must begin again, whatever the night had brought, and the little flame of continued industry be kindled on a hearth swept clean. Mrs. Rawlings knew this, although she did not think about it. She thought only in terms of her job, her wages and the need to provide for Doreen.

It was a relief to find her own office still intact. She had possessive feeling for it, since in a way it was more hers than anyone else's. She knew its early morning face, its intimate unwashed face, the face it would not care to show a stranger. The sound of her key in the lock roused it to life, her heavy tread wakened the floor-boards, her duster fluttered the stagnant, smoky air. The men and women who would work there during office hours seemed to her no more than visitors — careless, dirty people who found a state of decency and order and engaged themselves all day in wrecking it. She did not doubt, although she would have been ashamed to put such a fanciful thought into words, that the office liked her best.

But this morning she worked mechanically and without zest, her mind entirely occupied with Doreen. She had left her still asleep, her mattress laid alongside Edie Sharp's, her small pointed face half hidden among the blankets. She would sleep late, because she had been awake a long while in the night, lying quite still and listening, not crying, not commenting. Edie (a stupid child, in Mrs. Rawlings's opinion) had never stopped talking, kneeling up, scrambling in and out of bed, interrupting and exclaiming. But Doreen was never one to say much; she took after her there, Mrs. Rawlings told herself. She approved her reticence, but it sometimes made it difficult to know what she was thinking. Was she afraid? She didn't seem afraid. Children took their tone from their elders, and Mrs. Rawlings knew that she had never shown fear. To show fear was to admit danger. And to admit danger was to admit that she was wrong to keep Doreen.

Teacher had tried to persuade her to part with Doreen over a year ago, when the school had evacuated. A nice fool she would have been if

she'd agreed then! A year was a long time in a child's life. A child could almost forget you in a year. She had smiled to herself as the months went by and the panicky women had drifted back, full of complaints and hair-raising tales. More fools them she had thought. But she had liked them better than the ones who had not brought or fetched their children home. They might act as smug as they pleased, but she called it unnatural. Ten to one, it only meant they were glad to be shut of the trouble of looking after them.

Of course there was the schooling. Teacher had said that it wasn't fair to Doreen — Doreen was clever, she might go far. Well then, if she was clever, Mrs. Rawlings argued, what harm if she did miss a few months' schooling? She could catch up quick enough, couldn't she? If the school board didn't like it, let them bring the teachers back where they belonged. They couldn't complain of Doreen's attendance before the war. Never missed a day, she hadn't, except for illness. Never had a dirty head, never earned a bad conduct mark. There weren't many children as well brought up as Doreen.

Arguing with the school teacher, the London County Council and the Board of Education, Mrs. Rawlings wrung out her cloth with savagery, sprinkled an extravagant amount of cleanser on the wash-basin and rubbed the taps as though they were her enemies themselves. Her anger sprang from unadmitted guilt. At the bottom of her heart she knew that all her reasoned objections to parting with Doreen — the grievances and complaints she had so greedily assimilated from returned evacuees, the anecdotes she had jealously collected of country dangers to a town-bred child — all these were only pretexts. She had kept Doreen in London because she wanted to; because Doreen was her life and her

love; because a world without Doreen held emptiness.

Helen Osborne, annoyed at finding herself arrived early at the office for once (she had allowed time for dislocated transport and the line had been intact), was horrified to discover Mrs. Rawlings in the wash-room obviously in tears. Tears, these days, were frightening; they could spring from much worse causes than a breakage or the toothache. She remembered that Mrs. Rawlings had a child and her heart stopped beating for a moment. It was one of the things she had learned lately, that hearts did really cease to beat.

At the sight of her — one of the office crowd — Mrs. Rawlings pulled herself together. She had always been ashamed of any show of weakness or inadequacy. Miss Osborne was Mr. Scott's secretary and a pleasant enough young lady, but Mrs. Rawlings did not want anybody's sympathy just now. She kept her head turned, after a mumbled greeting, and furtively wiped her eyes on the roller towel. But Miss Osborne did not go away. She opened her hand-bag and began to make up her face in front of the mirror over the wash-basins. Mrs. Rawlings saw that she was watching her in the mirror, with an expression at once concerned and hesitant. She looked tired herself, as if she knew that nothing she did to-day was going to improve her appearance and she didn't much care.

"It was a bad night, wasn't it?" she said at last, too casually.

"Bad enough," Mrs. Rawlings concurred.

"You didn't get blitzed?" Helen asked anxiously. "You're all right?"

"I haven't been home yet, miss, but we was all right in the shelter. It's only . . ." She broke off, realising suddenly that she wanted to talk after all, that it would be a relief. It seemed to her that

Miss Osborne's concern was genuine and she felt unexpectedly touched. "I'm a bit upset like," she went on, with a shade of apology in her voice that was half for the weakness she confessed and half for her previous withdrawn. "It's not knowing what I ought to do with Doreen — my little girl. I made up my mind last night that I'll have to send her away if this goes on. Do you think it will, miss?"

"I'm afraid so. Through the winter, anyway."

"That's the trouble. These long nights . . . Maybe if I sent her out of London now, it would be all right to have her back in the spring, like." She was arguing with herself, implicitly asking for a reassurance which Helen could not give. "I've always set my face against evacuating her. You hear such tales. . . . The truth is, you don't know what to do for the best." She sighed.

Poor old Rawlings, Helen thought compassionately; who would have imagined she could be so human? Just as high explosive bombs could penetrate below the surface of the ground, exposing pipes and wires and cables which the ordinary citizen had never realised existed, so, it appeared, they could penetrate the crusty surface of dour, enigmatic Mrs. Rawlings and bring to light a complicated network of affections, fears and self-communings. Sleepily, she played with the analogy, imagining Mrs. Rawlings as an anatomical cross-section, her nerves and veins revealed and coloured like a chart. The nerves contracted, the heart beat. But this fissure could be closed again as suddenly as it had opened, once the threat of imminent danger had passed. She supposed it was her duty to make sure that it did not close again too quickly. She detested doing things that were her duty.

"Have you ever thought of evacuating her privately, Mrs. Rawlings?" she asked.

"Privately, miss?"

"Well, not with a whole bunch, by government arrangement. Haven't you any relatives in the country you could send her to?"

"No, miss. There's no one." Her mouth shut tightly on the words. It was as though she were denying something.

"Why don't you try for a job outside London, where you could take Doreen with you? As a housekeeper, or something? There are plenty about now."

"I couldn't do that, miss." She looked almost shocked at the suggestion. "I've got my home to keep together, haven't I? I wouldn't like Doreen not to have her own home to come back to."

Drat the woman, Helen thought impatiently. Now I shall have to say it, I suppose. I shall have to interfere in other people's lives and no good ever comes of it. For a moment longer she hesitated, her instincts and her conscience opposed. What if the child were to be killed or maimed? It would be nothing to do with her really, but she would feel in a way responsible unless she had made the offer. Children were so helpless — it wasn't fair to let them suffer for their parent's prejudices and stupidities. The final decision wouldn't rest with her, in any case. She was only the go-between.

"As a matter of fact," she said slowly, "I believe I know some people who would like to have her; my brother and sister-in-law. They live in the country and they've never even heard a siren. They're fond of children and they haven't any of their own. Would you like me to sound them about it?"

"It's ever so kind of you, miss," Mrs. Rawlings murmured automatically.

Inwardly, she was seized with panic. It was one thing to decide to part with Doreen, another to take

definite and immediate steps to bring about the parting. For an instant she almost hated Miss Osborne, seeing her only as an instrument of separation, forgetting that a moment before she had been feeling grateful for her sympathy. People didn't ought to take you up so sharp, she told herself . . . . And then the other Mrs. Rawlings — the tired woman who had listened to the bombs and recognised them as a judgment — came back again. Miss Osborne was gentry, and the gentry wouldn't be likely to undertake the care of a child unless they meant to do their duty by her. It might be just the thing for Doreen—a nice home with particular people . . . . To cover her indecision, she went on polishing the taps. It was only Miss Osborne's suggestion, anyway. Perhaps they wouldn't fancy the idea.

"How soon would you be ready to part with her?" Helen asked. She wished she had seen the child. She was probably horribly spoilt.

"Any time, really, miss. Of course I'd have to get her a few things. . . ."

"I could write today — but then I couldn't hear before Friday at the earliest. I might ask them to wire me. I don't want to hold up any other plans you might make. You must tell me honestly, Mrs. Rawlings, if you really like the idea."

"It's more for them to say, miss," Mrs. Rawlings reminded her primly. "My Doreen's very well behaved, but it's not everybody would want the trouble. They might think as how I ought to send her to be billeted in the ordinary way."

Helen laughed. "You don't know my sister-in-law. She's sentimental about children. She always wanted some of her own, you see. Anyhow, we can't do any harm by asking. Have you said anything about it to Doreen herself yet?"

"No, miss, I haven't said anything." She gave her cloth a final wring and hung it on the pipe to dry. "She'll likely be a bit upset," she added slowly.

On the way home, she wondered how she would tell Doreen when the moment came. Doreen was shy, you might call it timid even, her mother owned. Teacher said she had to be encouraged or she wouldn't make progress. Time and time again Mrs. Rawlings had tried to imbue her with her own tenacity of purpose, her own dogged, aggressive resistance to the injustices of the world, but it made no difference. Doreen couldn't, or wouldn't stand up for herself. Rather than protest, she would endure everything. One of Mrs. Rawlings's fears about evacuating her had been that, whatever the conditions, she would not write home to complain. Bombs or no bombs, her mother thought fiercely, I'll fetch her back if she's unhappy. And there flowed through her, intensified, the mixture of tenderness and impatience which was the core of her love for this only child, which made her by turns demonstrative and scolding, goading her to nag from sheer exasperated, mystified devotion.

Doreen had put the kettle on and laid the table for breakfast when her mother got home. Mrs. Sharp had brought her back from the shelter, had lit the fire and set the mattress to air. She was a kind neighbour, Mrs. Rawlings conceded rather grudgingly. But everything looked stale, dusty and uncared for, not as she liked to see it. It was a come-down living in two rooms after you'd had a whole house to yourself, but that was no reason for not keeping the place respectable. It did not worry her that there was far too much furniture crammed together in a small space — most of the furniture that had once spread over a semi-detached house; one

day she would have a house again and then it would all be needed; but it fretted her to have no proper kitchen — only a meatsafe on the window-sill and a gas-stove and a sink on the landing outside. It wasn't right, either, to have to share the lavatory with the tenants on the floor below; the Sharps were decent people, but you couldn't always pick and choose your neighbours; it wasn't right for Doreen. She thought of the white-tiled wash-rooms in the office and for once resented them. They were hers, in a way, and ordinarily she took a pride in their perfection. But this morning she resented everything desirable that Doreen could not share.

Behind the screen at the top of the stairs, Doreen washed herself at the sink while her mother fried bread and potatoes for her breakfast. Afterwards, since there was no school to go to, she would give a hand with tidying up the place. No need nowadays to make the double bed they shared, since no one ever slept in it; their blankets lay folded under the fringed white counterpane, ready to take to the shelter. Presently they would go out and wait together in the queues outside the baker's and the greengrocer's, and that way the morning soon passed. In the afternoon Doreen would be alone again, or playing in the street with Edie Sharp, for Mrs. Rawlings "did for" a young woman in business and she had to leave at two o'clock and rarely returned before five. Sometimes she took Doreen with her, if it were a fine day and she thought the outing would be good for her, and then Doreen would curl up in the largest arm-chair and read the illustrated papers which the young woman brought home in large supply. Doreen was not much trouble; her mother had spoken the truth there.

Sitting opposite her at table, Mrs. Rawlings observed her minutely but surreptitiously. It was

true that she looked pale, but then she hadn't really got rid of her last cold yet. No matter how fussy you were about airing the bedding, the shelter was damp to sleep in. You couldn't expect otherwise, all those feet under the ground. Stay in your house and risk being bombed, go to the shelter and risk getting pneumonia — that was what it amounted to. She wouldn't spend another hour in that dismal warehouse basement, she resolved, when Doreen was safely out of the way; she'd take her chance with the rest. Night after night trying to sleep in a deck-chair, going to work in the morning in clothes you hadn't taken off, you might as well be homeless for all the rest and comfort you got. Nobody need think she'd kept Doreen in London to suit her own convenience. Nobody need think that *she* was scared of bombs. She poured herself another cup of tea and stirred it with defiance.

"Did you have your sleep out, love?" she asked solicitously.

"I slept on till everyone began to move. Mrs. Sharp couldn't wake Edie at first. She shook and shook her. Edie was awfully cross. She hates getting up."

"I reckon she was tired after being awake so long in the night. It was noisy, wasn't it?" Mrs. Rawlings suggested tentatively.

"Oh, Edie's always cross in the mornings, anyhow," Doreen said easily. "All through first hour at school she used to be cross."

"Did you mind the noise?"

"Oh no. I didn't mind."

The pale face was serene, the brown eyes untroubled. Doreen ate her bread and margarine and appeared completely tranquil. There! Mrs. Rawlings exclaimed inwardly and triumphantly to an invisible audience of her critics. She felt

appeased and comforted, yet strangely her resolve was strengthened. No harm had been done yet, but it didn't do to push your luck too far.

"Sometimes I think you ought to go into the country like the other children," she ventured.

"Would you come too?" Doreen asked anxiously.

"Well, I couldn't do that — could I? Who'd keep the place going and find the money?"

"I wouldn't want to go without you," Doreen said firmly.

Mrs. Rawlings let the subject drop. It would be time enough to say more if anything came of Miss Osborne's proposal. Here, in her own kitchen, with Doreen sitting opposite her just as usual, the whole idea seemed too unlikely and remote to merit serious consideration. She would go to the office one morning and Miss Osborne would explain apologetically that, after all, her people couldn't undertake it. Doreen would have to leave London; she had made up her mind to that; but at the moment, with the night so far away already, there seemed no special urgency about it. She had been stupid to let Miss Osborne see her so upset. But nothing would come of it.

CHAPTER II

With Helen's letter in her pocket, Francie cycled down the hill to the village to call on Mrs. Renshawe at the Vicarage. She wanted her advice. Geoffrey thought, or behaved as though he thought, that helpfulness and nonobstruction were the same things; he had shrugged his shoulders and handed back the letter, saying that it was entirely up to her

— she could have the child or refuse, just as she liked. But Francie needed more than that. It was a weakness in her character, of which she was perfectly well aware, to find it difficult to make an unaided decision. The very fact that she desired something herself made her compensatingly anxious to give weight to the objections to it.

There was no doubt in her mind as to what she would like to do on this occasion. Helen had not miscalculated there. Already as she cycled along, she was imagining a misty-featured child accompanying her. Through her eyes, she looked at everything afresh — the hedged fields which, at first, would seem so much alike, then the village itself, straggling and haphazard, with no particular charm of obvious rusticity but with its own pleasant character of life lived slowly and on the whole contentedly within a small compass and for a great many generations. Francie hoped, and believed, that any child would be happy here, when the initial loneliness and strangeness had worn off. Towns were for adults, their senses blunted, their impressions grown a little calloused. She had passed her own childhood in a succession of large towns, and it had been the most unhappy period of her life.

When Francie's father had married her mother, he had been sixty and she thirty-two. It was his second marriage and his children by his first wife, themselves already adult, had bitterly resented it. Six years after Francie's birth her mother had died and her father had survived her by only a few months. Since her mother had no relatives, Francie had automatically become the charge of her step-brothers and sisters. They had sent her away to school when she was seven and reluctantly taken turns to have her in the holidays. It was an arrangement which had made for little feeling of security.

Lonely children sometimes become self-sufficient, but Francie was not blessed with a self-sufficient heart. She had, indeed, a votive heart and had offered it at many shrines. Although she did not know it, it was almost more necessary for her to love than to be loved. But the adored school-teachers were wary of showing favouritism and, besides, were only interested in their pupils for thirty odd weeks in the year, and the aunts and uncles (for so her brothers and sisters had elected to be called, feeling it outrageous and undignified that so young a child should address them by their Christian names) had their own families. They were just and well-meaning and they always took care to remind themselves that it was not Francie's fault that she had been first born and then orphaned; but in spite of these precautions Francie grew up knowing herself to be a problem and an incubus, and no amount of happiness in later life had been able to eradicate the self-distrust engendered by this knowledge. The votive heart had been repulsed so often that it had lost value in its owner's eyes as well. To the end of her days Francie would never be able quite to free herself from the conviction that her personal desires were of no consequence and that to have what she wanted was somehow wrong.

Mrs. Renshawe, brisk and self-assured, was not handicapped by any such disability. Also, she loved Francie with a protective love which neither of her own two daughters called forth in her. They were married and out in the world, they were too much like her to be at all dependent. She had known Francie only ten years, but it seemed longer because Francie had so quickly acquired the habit of confiding in her. Her strength of mind appealed to Francie's weakness and was flattered by it.

Although the Vicarage now housed three evacuated women with their children under five, who quarrelled righteously among themselves about the use of the bathroom and kitchen, Mrs. Renshawe would always disengage herself from domestic complications or her parish duties if it were to talk to Francie. She would go on ironing or mending or arranging the church flowers and listen at the same time. She was ironing to-day and Francie offered to help. But Mrs. Renshawe knew from experience that this would probably end in something being scorched, and she refused.

"Helen has written to ask if we'd like to take charge of a child while the raids are on," Francie began without further preamble. "A little girl of nine, the daughter of the woman who cleans Helen's office. Her mother wants to send her somewhere where she knows a bit about the people. What do you think we should say?"

"How does Geoffrey feel about it?" Mrs. Renshawe enquired.

"I don't think he *feels* anything. He leaves it to me to decide. It's I who'll have to look after her, he says. Of course it will be a tie and I've only got poor Lucy to help, but I think perhaps we ought to say 'yes'. I mean, it's terrible to leave a child in London now, isn't it? We should feel so guilty if we refused and anything happened. . . ."

"Then you've really made up your mind already?"

"Oh no. I mean, I ought to consider Geoffrey too, oughtn't I? If we don't take the child, her mother will send her somewhere else — Helen says she has decided to evacuate her whatever happens. And Geoffrey's so dreadfully tired and overworked these days — a noisy child might be almost more than he could bear. Of course, a girl is less risk

than a boy. But you do hear rather alarming accounts of some of the children."

Having put the case both for and against, as impartially as she could, Francie waited to be told what to do. She respected Mrs. Renshawe's views because they were always motivated by a strong sense of duty and, although she would have denied it, Francie believed implicitly in doing her duty. Because she was rather incompetent, gentle, vague and easily abashed, this stubborn basic conscientiousness was a matter for affectionate derision with Geoffrey and Helen, who had their own scruples and code of behaviour, but who never bothered to consider whether these accorded with the general tenets. Knowing that Francie loved them, sharing her opinion of their superior attainments, they could not understand why she should ever question their decisions. But Francie suspected them of always wanting her to have the pleasant things in life.

This time, however, it was Mrs. Renshawe who said :

"But what do you really feel about it yourself, Francie? Would you like to have this child ?"

"I'd love to have her. Of course." She seemed surprised that anyone should doubt it.

Mrs. Renshawe smiled rather grimly and folded the shirt she had been ironing.

"Well, my dear, I've had five children of my own and the care of many others from time to time, but I don't pretend I've always enjoyed the task. Children are only the young of the species, after all, and they vary as much as their parents do. Don't make the mistake of being too romantic about them. It's easy to love one's own children, because that's part of human egotism, but other people's children are a different matter. And a child of nine is past the age when you can mould her as your own."

"But I shouldn't want to mould her!" Francie protested, shocked. "I'd only want her to be happy. I think it's very important that children should be happy. I mean, what happens to you afterwards never makes up, does it?"

"I suppose not," Mrs. Renshawe said, beginning to iron another shirt. "But I don't really know, for I was very happy when I was a child."

Francie stared at the movements of the iron as though she had never seen one in action before. But she was not conscious of what she looked at.

"Supposing," she said slowly, "her mother had told this child that she might be coming to stay with us, and then she had to tell her that we didn't want her. That would be terrible, wouldn't it?"

"It would depend on the child," Mrs. Renshawe said reasonably. "Some children are more sensitive than others."

"I've always felt sorry for children who weren't really wanted," Francie went on, as if she had not heard her. "That's partly why I've always wanted children of my own — because at least they couldn't ever feel like that." She gave a sad little laugh. "But other people get the children they don't want and I get none. It's all very badly arranged, isn't it?"

Mrs. Renshawe was not going to commit herself to any criticism of Divine Providence, although her feelings towards Francie were keenly sympathetic. In silence, she licked her finger and tested the iron. It made a slight hissing noise.

"I think I've decided now," Francie said abruptly in a different voice. She sounded determined, almost challenging.

"And what are you going to do?" Mrs. Renshawe asked placidly.

"I'm going to say I'll have her."

Cycling home again, after stopping at the post-office to wire Helen, she felt excited and full of anticipation. Something which before had seemed pleasurable but unreal had now achieved a definite substance. It did not occur to her that during the course of the morning she had substituted for a perfectly unknown little girl, with different circumstances and a different background, the image of her own young self. A child must be made happy to appease one who had been unhappy. She had summoned a ghost to lay a ghost.

The opportunity to tell Geoffrey of her decision did not come until the evening, when he returned from the office. Even then it did not come at once, for he brought back with him a bottle of sherry a client had given him, and for the first ten minutes or so he was engaged in finding a corkscrew and glasses and insisting that Francie should join him in sampling it. Then, relaxed and content, he stretched out his legs to the fire and smiled at her.

"It's good," he pronounced. "I've drunk it before. Old Winterton kept a first-class cellar but didn't take the precaution of emptying it in time. His son's a Philistine who only drinks beer — hence this bottle for me. I hope he keeps it up."

But Francie could not pretend any longer to be listening.

"I wired Helen this morning to say we'd have that child," she said.

"I thought you would." He did not sound much concerned.

"I think we really ought to have her, Geoffrey," she enlarged eagerly. "I'm sure she'll be perfectly well-behaved. It isn't as though she were a really young child who would need one person's whole attention. She'll go to school and put herself to bed and so on. I expect we'll get quite fond of her."

"I expect you will, anyhow," he said lightly. "Personally, I reserve judgment. I've never been able to understand the attraction of children *qua* children. Some of them are detestable — just pocket editions of detestable adults. Others, of course, start detestable but outgrow it, up to a point. Helen was one of those, and I suspect I was myself."

"That was what Mrs. Renshawe said," Francie murmured.

"What? That I was detestable?" Geoffrey chuckled. "She didn't know me. She's only guessing — deducing my past from my graceless present. Pure professional jealousy."

"Don't be silly, darling — you know she likes you very much, even though you don't go to church. I meant that Mrs. Renshawe said that children were only grown-ups in miniature and just as mixed. But I don't agree with either of you. I think all children are alike in a special way, but I don't know the words to explain what I mean."

"All green and innocent and dewy?" Geoffrey suggested, to help her out.

"No, not that. I think I mean . . . Well, that they're all real people to themselves and only half-real people to the rest of the world. Except to other children, of course. However much they're loved, they're never taken quite seriously. And yet their own lives and their own feelings are terribly important to them. I'm sorry for children because they're so helpless. They have to go where they're pushed. I know that I did, anyhow."

"Now you're arguing from the general to the particular, my sweet," Geoffrey said gently. "Have another glass of sherry?"

"No, thank you. I shall mess up the dinner if I do. Why is it supposed to be wrong to argue from the general to the particular? I've often

wondered. After all, it's only the particular that you can be really sure about."

"I must have notice of that question," Geoffrey parried, smiling.

"Now you're treating *me* like a child," Francie accused him.

"Nonsense. I like you much better than any child. You have all their traditional virtues and none of their actual shortcomings."

Francie sighed and stood up.

"Well, anyhow, I'm glad she's coming," she said almost defiantly.

"Don't worry," Geoffrey pledged himself, "I'll be nice to her."

"Oh, I'm not worrying about *that*. But I want you to enjoy being nice."

Left alone, Geoffrey filled his glass again and stared into the fire. He felt vaguely melancholy. The truth was, he admitted to himself, he had acquired almost a habit of feeling melancholy when alone. Up till a year ago he had despised the type of man who would rather talk to anyone than no one, grew bored with his own company and would go miles to avoid it. But now it seemed to him that what he had written off as vacancy of mind might be only another name for the obscure, nagging uneasiness to which he had fallen a victim himself. In the quiet of solitude, voices could be heard asking disagreeable questions — Where are you going? . . . What have you achieved and has it been worth it? Self-consciousness was a word one used too lightly. He had become conscious of himself in a manner removed from and inimical to ordinary contented human egotism. A part of himself felt the comfortable warmth of the fire on his shins and the comfortable warmth of the sherry on his palate, but another part stood detached by the

width of the hearth-rug — detached and critical. He saw himself, through those eyes, as not very much of a fellow and luckier than he deserved. Happily married, financially secure, his own master and his own landlord, a little illhealth was not a great deal to put in the opposing scales. Young men died in battle and he proved their wills. He did not like to think that they had died, however unintentionally, for him.

But I'll get used to it, he told himself bitterly. Another year or two and I'll be taking it for granted. He remembered a story he had always meant to write, had once even begun to put on paper in his undergraduate days when it was fashionable in his circle to be lettered. It was about a man who, as a boy, was saved from drowning by a casual passer-by who lost his own life in the act. The boy grew up with an obsession that the only way to make amends was to find out what the dead man had hoped to achieve and do it in his stead. His life had ceased to be his own, was only an extension of the life that had been given for it. But Geoffrey had never finished the story, for he could not imagine what the end might be.

Well, there was no use supposing he could fulfil those many, many lives. He had better drink up his sherry and get on with the existence at hand. He felt rather remorseful for having teased Francie about something which she obviously really cared about. Even after ten years, she still took him very literally and was uncritically downcast when they disagreed. She was a very much nicer person than he was and deserved better of him, for one thing. But he sometimes wondered if their marriage would have been as happy if she had.

At dinner Francie apologised for having burnt the sauce and blamed the sherry for it. She had a

poor head for drink. They exchanged the gossip of the day they had spent apart, Francie giving news of what had happened in the village and Geoffrey telling what had come his way in Wychmore, the small town six miles up the line where he practised as a solicitor. The war had narrowed their lives, removing many of their friends and cutting them off from others. The war was as near as the neighbouring aerodrome and as remote as fallen France. "You don't know down here that there's a war on." Helen would jeer. But it was only partly true.

"I wonder if there'll be a raid on London tonight," Francie said apprehensively.

"Why tonight especially? Except that there always is one."

"I don't know. I keep thinking. . . . Anyway, we only got the letter this morning and I'd sent the wire by midday. Do you think she'll come tomorrow?"

"More probably Friday or Saturday, if Helen brings her. You wrote suggesting that?"

"Oh yes. I wrote in time to catch the post."

"What room are you going to give her?"

"I thought the little room next to ours. Then if she's nervous she can knock on the wall."

Geoffrey gave her an eloquent look but said nothing.

"I don't suppose she *will* be nervous," Francie added hastily. "But it will all be terribly strange to her. I'm going to look out some of my old children's books tomorrow and hang some nice pictures. And I thought when you're in Wychmore you could go to the stationer's and buy some games — ludo and snakes and ladders and things like that."

"Have I henceforth to spend my evenings playing snakes and ladders?" Geoffrey enquired, with heavy irony.

Francie smiled, undeceived.

"It would do you good, darling — relax your mind. But actually I wouldn't let you, because you always cheat."

"That's a base calumny. I simply apply a little skill to boring games of undiluted chance."

"But she might not understand the difference. Seriously, though, we shall have to alter our way of life to a certain extent. Don't be cross with me later on, will you, if I find I can't always do things with you when you want me to? Dine out, for instance — I don't see how we shall ever be able to do that while we have her with us. Lucy would be much too scared to spend an evening here alone, and she's not a responsible person, anyhow."

"I think I might sacrifice my convenience to that extent," he said half jokingly, half bitterly. "Then when people ask me what I did in the Second World War, I shall be able to reply: 'I gave hospitality to an evacuated child and didn't complain when my meals were late.' That ought to make a good impression."

"Don't talk like that," she told him almost angrily.

"All right. I won't again. Let's have another sherry with our coffee. It's unorthodox, but I've nothing else in the house. We'll drink to our evacuee — may she like us and we like her, and may we none of us regret our meeting."

CHAPTER III

AT the bookstall on Paddington Station, Helen asked for a children's paper. What were their things called? "Comics." She remembered the garish

charms from her own childhood — *Puck, Rainbow* and the rest. But there were no children's papers to be bought. Home Guard manuals and pamphlets on Aircraft Identification appeared to be all that railway passengers could amuse themselves with nowadays. Hurriedly, almost at random, she chose a couple of low-grade weeklies. If the child didn't like them, she must just look out of the window.

She had left her seated in the train, but she was standing on the platform by the open door when Helen rejoined her. Frightened that the train would carry her off alone, probably. Poor little rabbit, Helen thought without much sentiment. She found the company of children rather tiresome, but she was kind-hearted in a studiedly unemotional way and she admitted to herself a certain pathos in the situation. The child looked white enough to satisfy even Francie's romantic heart. White and scared. But more scared, Helen deduced, of the haven that awaited her than of the bombs she was leaving behind.

"There you are, Doreen. Something for you to read."

She closed the carriage door behind them. The train was full enough but not packed. It was a little early in the day for week-end travellers. Mr. Scott had not been pleased to let her leave before time, but he could scarcely raise much objection. After all, Mrs. Rawlings was an employee too, in a way; she had cleaned the offices for five years now; and no one would want the responsibility of keeping a child in London one unnecessary night in these times.

"Have you been in a train often, Doreen?"

"No, miss. Only four times. When we went to Worthing."

"Oh yes. Worthing. It's nice there isn't it? I suppose you used to play on the sands, and bathe?"

"I didn't bathe, miss. Mum didn't like me to go out that far. But I paddled."

"Well, paddling's fun, too."

How damned condescending I sound, Helen thought disgustedly. Like a District Visitor. She felt suddenly extremely irritated — with herself, with the child, with the situation as a whole. Too many broken nights and suppressed apprehensions, she diagnosed in self-excuse. And, anyhow, she didn't think the role of Good Samaritan became her very well.

The train began to move and Doreen gave a slight, almost imperceptible start. With the unaccustomed perception which she so much resented, Helen wondered if she were going to weep. It must be rather an awful moment — no turning back now. Hastily, she handed her a bag of fruit-drops, congratulating herself on her fore-thought. Doreen offered her one politely before taking her own. Her manners did Mrs. Rawlings credit. Francie wouldn't have much trouble there, unless the good behaviour wore off with returning confidence.

She had behaved very well when parting with her mother, too. Mrs. Rawlings had brought her to the office; she had chosen to do that rather than to say good-bye at the station, and Helen thought she had been wise. All the same, she was a peculiar woman, she decided. The last thing she had wanted was an effusive expression of thanks, but it was rather hard to be made to feel like an avenging Nemesis, cold-bloodedly separating mother and child. At the sight of Mrs. Rawling's face, tight-lipped, strained, angry with pain, she had had to remind herself that she was really doing the woman a kindness. The timid, nondescript little girl, so obviously in her best clothes, had been easier to understand. She looked as though she had been crying,

but she had kept back her tears at the end. Helen had whisked her into a taxi, talking fast, pointing out things all the way to the station but not expecting to receive any but monosyllabic replies. And now here they were — committed, on their way. Thank God, from this evening onwards it would be Francie's problem. And Geoffrey's too, of course, in a lesser degree. She wondered how her brother felt about it. He might not be exactly pleased, but at least he would be kind. He would probably know how to talk to the child, too — which was more than she did.

Doreen was not looking at the papers on her lap. She was not sucking her sweets, either. Her legs dangled limply, but she held her thin, meagre body tautly upright and her colourless oval face was set, the lips unnaturally compressed. One hand held protectively the handle of a Woolworth attache case which rested on the seat beside her. The remainder of her belongings were contained in a fibre suitcase on the rack above her head.

"There's a dog where you're going," Helen roused herself to say. "Do you like dogs?"

Her lips moved before her voice came.

"Does it bite?"

"Good gracious, no. He's a nice friendly dog."

"There was a girl at school and she was bitten by a dog," Doreen explained, with a shade of apology.

"Do you like shool?" Perhaps school would prove a more successful opening, Helen thought with an inward amusement which was directed against herself and her own attempts.

"Our school's shut now. The teachers went into the country. Is there a school . . . there, miss?"

"There's a very nice school there, and you'll have lots of boys and girls to play with again."

"Do they come from London?"

"One or two, maybe. But they mostly live in the village."

"Oh. I thought perhaps . . ." Her voice trailed off. It had evidently been a private thought, the wraith of a hope too foolish to be owned.

"Of course it's winter now," Helen went on with determined kindness. "But there are plenty of amusing things to do in the country, even in winter." She tried to think of some of them, but the truth was that life in the country bored her at most seasons. "You'll make some friends and go to tea with them, I expect. And there's a big garden belonging to the house, and a pond with goldfish in it, and a little stream — where you can paddle. Oh, you'll have a lot of fun."

She smiled with reassurance and finality and opened the book on her lap. She had done her best, but one couldn't keep this sort of conversation going interminably — not for an entire two hours. She believed that in the long run you could only rely on yourself, and the sooner the child realised it, the better for her. It was no worse than going to boarding school for the first time. Plenty of people had done that, and most of them had survived the experience. She lit a cigarette and willed herself to take an interest in the novel she was reading.

At the sight of Helen reading, Doreen picked up one of the papers she had been given and pretended to read too, unconsciously prompted by an instinctive social sense. She knew that she must not be a nuisance. Ordinarily she liked reading, but the paper was unfamiliar and she did not understand the jokes — they had no power to distract her thoughts. Her thoughts nagged her, were anxious and importunate. She had become the sum of her anxieties, the real Doreen quite lost. How would she know when to go to bed and what would They

give her to eat? Supposing it was beetroot? Would They be angry with her if she said she didn't like beetroot? If the dog barked at her and she showed that she was frightened, would They laugh? Who would darn her stockings? Would They think she ought to know how to darn them herself? Mum had said, send a post-card when you get there, and had given her one all written out, but supposing she couldn't find a pillar-box? Supposing They learned quite different things at school There and had got past fractions? Would They think she was stupid? Would the other children laugh? What would happen now if she was to be sick in the train? Would Miss Osborne be very angry? Would she have time to get down the corridor if she felt sick? That soldier in the corner with his legs stuck out — would she get past him in time?

The soldier smiled at her, almost as if he knew what she was thinking. She smiled back uncertainly and, although she looked away, immediately felt better. Perhaps there would be some soldiers There. Perhaps that soldier was going There. If she saw him in the street, it would be like meeting someone she knew, even if he didn't remember her. But perhaps he would remember her. He might stop and say: "Hullo — I saw you in the train." Then she could tell him all about it — being evacuated and miss Osborne working in Mum's office and going to stay with Them. She might even tell him about the shelter and Mr. and Mrs. Sharp and Edie. When Mrs. Sharp took her teeth out, you couldn't understand what she said. She slept in a deck-chair like Mum. But she and Edie slept on mattresses on the floor and they laughed a lot, underneath the blankets. Edie had been sorry when she said good-bye. It wouldn't be any fun in the shelter now, Edie said.

She had promised to write to Edie. And to Mum. She had a writing-pad with envelopes in her bag. There was some comfort in that recollection and in the thought of all the other things she now possessed, quite personally, not shared with anyone. She had her own brush and comb now and her own tooth-paste. Perhaps they would run out of tooth-paste one day, and then she would say: "You can have some of mine, if you like," and They'd be surprised. She had a new pair of sand-shoes and a new school blouse and two new pairs of pyjamas. Mum had spent an awful lot of money all in one day, but it helped to know they were there in the bag above her head. Thinking about them, she forgot that she had wondered if she might be going to feel sick, and the time passed quite quickly till the train stopped at Reading. The soldier got out at Reading. He smiled at Doreen as he went, and that was a little consolation for the disappointment of losing him.

"We shan't stop again for some while," Helen said. "You can stand in the corridor, if you like."

Doreen did not know whether she would like this or not, but she knew that it was what Miss Osborne wanted her to do, so she agreed at once. Someone shut the sliding door of the carriage behind her and there she was, cut off from the little, boxed-in world in which she had been carried forward in a kind of passive isolation, standing on deck, as it were, and conscious for the first time of the whole length of the train, of its speed and of its freight of fellow-passengers. Glancing surreptitiously through the windows of other compartments, she saw people of every kind, smoking, talking (their lips moved but no sound came to her), eating things out of paper-bags or leaning back with closed eyes. She wondered where they could all

be going to, and she thought they must be wondering the same thing about her.

Presently, a girl of about her own age came out of one of the compartments and stood looking out of the next window — or rather, pretending to, for it was obvious that her attention was more for Doreen than the view. A curve in the line rocked the train and threw them both off their balance, and at that the other child laughed and moved closer, saying something which Doreen did not hear. She looked at her blankly, and the child laughed again and raised her voice:

"I like standing in the corridor, don't you? I hate sitting still."

"I don't mind either way," Doreen said shyly. "I haven't been in trains often."

"Haven't you really? I have — I've been in thousands, I should think. Well, hundreds, anyway. Before the war, we used to go away every week-end in the train. At least Mummy and I went in the train and Daddy drove down in the car. But I'm always sick in cars. Are you sick in cars?"

Doreen was about to say that she hadn't often been in cars either, but she changed her mind and only shook her head.

"You're lucky. It is an awful nuisance. But Mummy says I'll grow out of it. I am going to Oxford. Is that where you're going?"

Doreen hesitated.

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Do you mean to say you don't *know* where you're going?" She looked at Doreen with amazement.

"I've forgotten the name. But it's two names, so it can't be Oxford." This hardly seemed explanation enough, so she added, with a certain pride: "I'm being evacuated."

"Oh." The situation was obviously changed. "That's different. Are you going all by yourself?" She was ready to be impressed.

"Miss Obsorne's taking me. She works in the office where Mum works. I'm going to stay with her sister-in-law. And her brother," she added as an afterthought.

"Do you know them?"

"No." It sounded rather curt, but suddenly her throat closed and she was afraid she was going to cry.

"How funny! What is your name?"

"Doreen."

"Mine's Amber. It's the name of a precious stone, did you know? Well, sort of precious. Daddy gave me a brooch with amber in it for my last birthday. I'm nine and a half."

"I'm nine and three months."

Amber looked relieved at finding herself the senior.

"There was a boy came to our house once and I asked him how old he was, and he said he was seventeen, and when I said I was nine he said: 'Never mind — you'll soon catch up.' But that was silly, wasn't it? Because when I'm seventeen, he'll be twenty-five."

This feat of mental arithmetic rather dazzled Doreen, and she did not attempt to check the figures. She began to wonder if she liked Amber. She wasn't as nice as Edie was. The memory of Edie nearly brought the tears to her eyes again.

Almost as if she could read her thoughts, Amber went on:

"Have you got a special friend? I have."

"I've got a friend called Edie Sharp," Doreen confided. "We used to sleep together in the shelter, in the raids."

[illegible] University
[illegible] Library

"I've never been in an air-raid," Amber said enviously. "I suppose you've been in lots?"

It was Doreen's turn now to boast.

"Dozens and dozens. Almost every night. A bomb fell that close to our house that some of the windows broke,"

"Were you frightened?"

"We was in the shelter. We didn't know till next morning. I'm not frightened in the shelter. It's nice there."

"Do bombs make a noise?"

"They sort of shake things. Shake the whole world. I've seen incendiaries, too. Little lights all up the street. . . . And once when we was late going to the shelter, I saw a Jerry plane caught in the searchlights. It was ever so exciting."

She was talking quite fluently now and in her own idiom. The careful speech of self-consciousness had been forgotten. Instinctively Amber realised that she was no longer the leader in their intercourse, and with determination she brought the conversation back on to her own ground.

"Well, I once saw an aeroplane crash. In a field. It was one of ours, actually." Her tone was regretful, but more on account of the anticlimax than from any nationalistic sentiment.

Again, although she did not analyse its origins, Doreen felt a little spasm of dislike for her, and with the dislike was mingled an undefined fear. Amber seemed to her the first inhabitant of the new world which awaited her — a world in which people spoke a subtly different language, travelled in motor-cars (except when they were sick) and had names that meant the same as brooches.

"Have you got any brothers or sisters?" Amber demanded. Her curiosity appeared to be insatiable.

"No. Have you?" She didn't really want to know, but it was polite to ask.

"I've got one brother, but he's five years older than me. His name's Michael, and he's going into the Army when he leaves school. Daddy's in the Army, but only because there's a war on. Is your father in the Army?"

As always, Doreen hesitated before replying to an enquiry about her father. The familiar lie never came easily to her. Mum said it wasn't a real lie, because it was nobody's business, and them as asked nosey questions shouldn't expect the truth. But Doreen could not help feeling a secret apprehension that the people who asked her really knew the answer all the time and were just testing her, to see what she would say. Because of that, she felt a curious double shame.

"My father's dead," she murmured.

Amber looked slightly disconcerted. She was not sure of the correct response, so she hurried on, pretending she had not heard.

"We're slowing down for Didcot. That's the station before Oxford. I'll have to go back to my carriage now or somebody might get in and try to take my seat. You'd better go back too."

"All right."

They looked at each other, oddly dispassionately, and turned in opposite directions. It occurred to neither of them to say good-bye. They had conformed to the strict conventions of childhood, but these did not include formal greetings or farewells.

Doreen found the carriage door heavy to slide open, and she was flushed and a little breathless when she sat down opposite Helen again. Helen smiled at her as though her conduct had pleased her. She had seen her talking to the other little girl and had felt relieved. Other children — that

was obviously the solution to the problem. She must remember to tell Francie. But Francie, no doubt, had thought of that herself.

When the train stopped at Oxford, Doreen glanced out of the window — a sidelong, secret glance — and saw Amber alight on the platform and rush to greet an elderly woman who was there to meet her. She danced excitedly between her and her mother, talking fast. She did not look round or wave to Doreen, and Doreen was glad. It would have embarrassed her to have to wave back, in front of Miss Osborne.

The rest of the journey passed quite quickly, because Miss Osborne took her along to the refreshment car to have tea, and that was exciting. She found that she was hungry and felt better when she had eaten. Then Miss Osborne looked at her watch and said that it was time to get back, and almost at once the train stopped again (it seemed to stop more often after Oxford) and Miss Osborne said:

"We get out here."

She gave Doreen her attache case to hold and carried her bag for her. Only a few other passengers alighted on the platform with them and Doreen looked anxiously towards the barrier, trying to decide which of the people standing there could be Them. But Miss Osborne passed through without speaking to anyone. She looked round her in the growing dusk and then told Doreen to stay by the luggage while she found the car. Doreen did not mind being left this time. It wasn't a big station like Paddington — it was so little that it reminded her of the toy stations sold with model railways, which she had admired in shop windows. There was only one porter, and he took the tickets and wheeled out the bicycles from the guard's van and did everything. She thought it must be nice to

have his job. In a minute or two Miss Osborne came back and told her to get into a car drawn up in the station yard. There was a man driving it, but Miss Osborne did not speak to him, except about the luggage, so Doreen decided he could not be one of Them. She had hardly ever driven in a car before, but she felt too much suspense to enjoy the ride. They drove past some cottages and then along a narrow road with hedges either side and trees in the fields beyond. The light was failing rapidly and it was difficult to distinguish the ghostly shapes of things which seemed to glide by them. The dimmed headlights cast only a feeble illumination on the road ahead and, watching it, Doreen began to feel drowsy, not with ordinary sleep but from a state of something like hypnosis. She slipped down on the seat and the faint, musty smell of the upholstery teased her with a recollection which she could not name.

Then the car stopped. She could just see the dark bulk of what appeared to be a very large house, standing back from the road. Somewhere close at hand a dog barked furiously.

CHAPTER IV

They left Doreen to sleep on in the morning. It was obviously the best thing to do, after the rather inauspicious beginning of the evening before. For Doreen had wept, with heart-rending quiet and stifled, hiccoughing sobs. Helen, who in the train had congratulated herself that her troubles would be done with once the child were handed over, had been compelled to act as comforter; it appeared that even the little-known Miss Osborne was better than the totally unknown woman who had given her

supper and put her to bed. Doreen had wept for her mother and Edie and the shelter, for everything familiar and comforting in her life up to this dark hour. She had finally gone to sleep holding Helen's hand, which Helen had found at once touching and annoying. It had annoyed her to find herself so touched.

Now, breakfast over, she helped Francie "do" the bedrooms, feeling sorry for herself and Doreen but sorriest of all for Francie. She was fond of her sister-in-law. There was something appealing about her thin body and long, fine hands, about the short, curly hair which was so much younger than her face, about her expression, which was sweet and rather comically worried at the same time, as though she loved the world but feared her own capacity to deal with it. Helen could perfectly understand why her brother had married Francie, even though they both knew that she wasn't very clever in spite of her charming, cultivated manners and her background of educated taste. She had made him a good wife and Helen did not think he was unhappy. Or if he were unhappy, it was not because of Francie.

Francie made a party of doing the housework this morning. It was a treat for her to have Helen's companionship, and she switched on the electric fire in each room as she came to it and lingered comfortably over every task, talking all the while. Conscientiousness and a natural inaptitude fought a fluctuating battle in her, so that none of the housework she undertook was very well done, yet none of it was badly done either. Helen trailed after her, dropping cigarette ash where she had just swept, but neither of them noticed. They kept their voices low, for fear of waking Doreen.

"I'm lucky to have this girl from the village," Francie said. "She's a little simple — not mentally

deficient, just simple — but it's so difficult to get any kind of domestic help nowadays. Her mother used to clean for me and I've known Lucy since she was a child. I've explained to her about Doreen, and I think she understood. She knows how to talk to children — she has younger brothers and sisters of her own. I thought perhaps Doreen could have breakfast in the kitchen with her this morning and lunch with us. Then, this afternoon I'll take her to the village with me and let her get her bearings. After tea, we might play cards with her, or something and I'll give her a light meal about half-past six and put her to bed before we dine. Do you think that sounds all right?"

"It's a marvellous programme, darling," Helen said inattentively. "But I shouldn't worry too much about details if I were you. Just leave the kid alone and she'll soon adjust herself."

"Oh, but I must try to make her feel at home!" Francie exclaimed. "I couldn't bear it if she cried again. When you go back tomorrow, I want you to be able to tell her poor mother that she has settled down happily. She must be so worried about her."

"I'd tell her that anyhow," Helen grinned. "I wouldn't dare do otherwise. She's a dour sort of female. I don't know how she managed to produce a timid little rabbit like Doreen."

"Perhaps Doreen is like her father," Francie suggested. "You never mentioned him. I suppose Mrs. Rawlings is a widow?"

"I suppose so too. She never mentioned him either. Perhaps he walked out on her. I wouldn't altogether blame him."

"I would," Francie said firmly; "when there was a child of the marriage."

"You're perfectly right, darling, of course, but

I haven't your high moral sense. Also, I don't much care for children, just as children. Though I like boys better than girls. I quite like devilish little boys. But when it comes to looking after them, I dare say a dumb little girl is less trouble."

"She'll talk enough when she feels less strange," Francie said confidently.

"I didn't mean that kind of dumb. She seems to me a bit stupid — quite docile and well-behaved, but definitely unintelligent. Don't inflict her on poor Geoffrey too much, will you, darling? It's all very well to have highminded ideas about no class distinctions and the duty of the citizen in war-time, but I expect Geoffrey would rather have his meals in peace with you."

"But we've arranged all that," Francie said anxiously. "I know Geoffrey isn't as fond of children as I am, but he agrees with me that having said we'll take her, we must do our best for her and look after her properly."

"You're both of you sweet, my pet. I haven't the least doubt that you'll spoil Doreen for life. I'm just trying to protect you from yourselves, that's all."

Doreen could hear the murmur of their voices through the wall. She lay in bed listening to them, relaxed after her long sleep, pleased with the sensation of the linen against her cheek and the yielding softness of the mattress. Her gaze wandered round the room, attentive and considering. It was only a small room, but it looked big because there was not much furniture in it — only the bed and a cupboard with drawers underneath and a chair and a bedside table. She liked the rug on the floor, which was blue, her favourite colour, and the two pictures on the wall. One was of a vase of flowers and one of a little girl in old-fashioned clothes, holding a ball. There was a shelf hanging up with books in it, but

she could not read their titles from where she lay. Mrs. Osborne had said last night that it was her room now. It hadn't seemed to matter much then, but this morning she felt cautiously elated. She had never had a room of her own before.

Through the window opposite her she could just see the top branches of a tree and a patch of grey winter sky. When she had lain and watched them for what seemed a long while, the temptation to see more became too pressing to be resisted. If she got out of bed very quietly and went on tiptoe, would they hear her? It was worth the risk. Shivering a little with the unexpected cold, she crossed to the window and looked out. Below her was a gravel path, backed by a thick hedge which screened what was immediately behind it. But beyond that the garden stretched in an immense expanse. She viewed it with a feeling of sharp disappointment. Where was the stream and the goldfish-pond? It looked just like the allotments in the park, where Edie's father grew vegetables. There was a man digging there, but she could not tell if it were Mr. Osborne, he was too far away. The only interesting things to be seen were a little house made all of glass and a wooden shed. The garden ended with a row of trees, and then came fields and fields, sloping down to the only other houses in sight, grouped together at the bottom of the hill. While she watched, a train travelled along the valley below. She wondered if it were going to London, and the thought made her melancholy. London was home and her mother, familiar, cluttered rooms and friendly, crowded streets. She had imagined the country as a place bathed in sunshine, where it was always summer-time and buttercups grew in the long green grass — not as this bare expanse of distance and grey skies. She turned away from the window, tears

pricking her eyes. She seemed to have been left alone a long time, and London seemed a long way off.

Hardly had she climbed back into bed than she heard the low voices outside her door. Her first panic reaction was to pretend to be asleep, but it was too late. They had opened the door, they were looking across at her, the two ladies. They smiled, and she returned their smile waveringly.

"Good-morning, Doreen," they said in chorus.

Why did they call her Do*reen*, she wondered? Her name was *Dor*een. But it wouldn't do to correct them. At all costs they must be pleased and placated.

"Ready to get up and have some breakfast?" Miss Osborne asked.

Mrs. Osborne asked:

"Did you sleep well, dear?"

And she murmured assent to both. Be a good girl, Mum had said; don't give any trouble. She found them easy injunctions to obey.

They sent her to wash in the bathroom, taking her clothes with her. She liked the bathroom. It had white tiles all the way up, like at Mum's office. She washed and dressed hurriedly and then decided she had been too quick and they might think she hadn't washed properly, so she lingered for a few minutes, climbing on a stool to look out of the window. The bathroom faced a different way, and this time she could see another part of the garden, with flower-beds and a lawn. It looked more interesting.

When she returned to her room it was empty, but the bed had been made and everything was scrupulously tidy. It gave her a keen, undefined pleasure to see it. Everything looked so new. She was glad that she had so many new things herself. Mrs. Osborne came in while she was combing her hair and found a parting for her and put in her slide.

Suddenly she bent down and gave her a quick, light kiss. It made Doreen feel rather queer.

"You're going to have your breakfast in the kitchen, darling," Mrs. Osborne said. "With Lucy. You haven't met Lucy yet. She doesn't sleep in the house, she only comes in the day-time."

Lucy was young and dumpy, with vacant eyes but a wide, foolish grin that was very reassuring. When she had seen Doreen settled at table, she went back to her work in the dining-room, every now and then putting her head through the service hatch to say something which Doreen could not always understand, because she had a funny way of speaking. She had a sister just Doreen's size, she said.

"She's clever — she can read and write."

"I can read and write too," Doreen boasted.

Lucy expressed a gratifying admiration and surprise.

But presently she went into another room, and then something happened which stopped Doreen's heart for a beat. The door, which stood ajar, was pushed open and the dog which had barked at her the night before padded in. He was a small, stubby dog with thick, coarse, black hair, a long blunt head and pointed ears. He made his way towards her very deliberately and sniffed at her dangling legs. Doreen sat quite motionless, but the skin on her legs seemed to crawl, waiting for the incision of sharp white teeth. She longed to call for Lucy, for anyone, but she feared that the sound of her voice might be the signal for him to attack. Just as she was about to risk everything in a mad dash for the door, he backed away, made a little whining, creaking noise, sat up and begged. The changeover from aggression to suppliant was so astonishing to her that for a moment she did not understand what it

meant. Then, with a quick glance round to make sure nobody was looking, she threw him the remainder of her rasher of bacon.

He sniffed that too, then swallowed it in a rapid and business-like way, waited for an expectant moment and begged again. Doreen tried him with a piece of toast, but this was obviously not of any interest.

"There isn't any more bacon," she informed him in a low voice.

It appeared that he perfectly understood, for he dropped down, licked her legs with a surprisingly cold, wet tongue and sauntered out again. In the whole proceedings there had been a quality of quiet conspiracy which made a profound impression on Doreen's mind. It was as though a prisoner in enemy hands had unexpectedly been given a secret signal of alliance by one of his guards. She continued her breakfast with a lightened heart.

Helen and Francie also looked out of an upstairs window and watched Geoffrey digging in the garden.

"He works too hard," Francie sighed. "It isn't good for him."

"I'll go and interrupt him," Helen suggested. "I want to talk to him, anyhow."

"I wish you would. He gets so tired and he is so obstinate about it."

Geoffrey looked tired. The soil was damp and heavy and his arms ached. He threw it up in rough clods that weighted the spade and clung to it, so that he had to stop at intervals to scrape it clean. He dug with a kind of controlled anger, pitting his fatigued body against the seemingly interminable expanse of the plot. Helen watched him for a moment before she spoke to him. Although he was only thirty-eight, a difference in age which had appeared enormous twenty years ago when she had been no more than seven but which nowadays had

no importance, he looked considerably older. The asthma which had kept him a civilian in war-time gave him a pronounced pallor, and while he had always been thin, his clothes now had a borrowed look and hung on him too loosely. Helen could understand her sister-in-law's concern. He gave the impression of a man driving himself to an exertion beyond his strength. It was not only at this moment, digging in the garden, she had thought the same thing about him the evening before. All his life he had been abnormally sensitive about his physical inferiority and the war had emphasised this. But because, from long habit of mind, he had learned to conceal his self-contempt, he showed this new reversal only by an increased quiet and a taut reserve. Where other people felt depressed or frightened when they read the news or listened to the radio bulletins, Helen thought her brother really suffered.

"Geoffrey!" she hailed him. "I want to talk to you."

"Oh, hullo. Just let me finish the row."

"You sound as though you were a woman with a piece of knitting. Don't be so finicky — it'll keep."

He thrust the spade into the loose earth and straightened himself painfully.

"Very well. But you'll get cold, standing there. Better walk round the garden with me."

"I don't mind, as long as you don't expect me to take an interest in your horrible raw vegetables."

They fell into step together and began to pace the neat square of kitchen garden. Helen had put on her coat and she kept her hands in her pockets. It was colder here than in London, she decided; it was colder — but it was more peaceful.

"For the first time in my life," she announced, "I feel that there is something to be said for living in the country. No bombs."

"Rather a negative virtue."

"The best accolade I can bestow. I'll allow that your garden is very attractive in summer, but that terrible house!"

"What's so terrible about it?" Geoffrey protested mildly. "It's very comfortable."

"It looks so out of place — like that woman who walked through the fields in gloves. It's a town house dumped down in the country. What on earth induced old Uncle James to build it like that?"

"It was the type of architecture he admired."

"Well, what induced you to come and live in it, then?"

"I seem to remember that we've been over this before," Geoffrey pointed out amiably. "He left me the practice, he left me the house. The two were quite conveniently juxtaposed, when one could run a car. Uncle James, of course, kept a horse and trap, God rest his soul. I liked the village and I liked Uncle James. Why should I sell his precious house?"

"It's too big for you."

"Ah, that I grant you. But we kept two maids before the war and we had hoped to have a family."

"You're lucky not to have the place filled with evacuees. Why haven't you, anyhow? Local influence?"

"Certainly not! It's too far from the village. They don't like it."

Helen glanced sideways at him.

"What do you think of the evacuee you've got now?" she enquired.

"I haven't had much opportunity to decide. Where is she this morning?"

"Eating her breakfast with Lucy in the kitchen. Were you horrified when I wrote suggesting that you took her?"

"Of course not. It must be a good thing for the child to get away from the raids, and Francie will enjoy looking after her."

"It sounds so simple, put like that. But I've an uneasy feeling that there are going to be complications."

"Naturally, there are always complications—you've surely found that out by now?" He smiled at her with characteristic mild irony.

"And you don't mind them? You won't curse me?"

"I shall thrive on them. They will give me something to think about, other than the progress or non-progress of the war. Is she a nice child, by the way?"

"She's well-behaved, anyhow. Yes, I think she is quite a nice child, in a negative fashion. She finds us all so alarming that it's probably not fair to judge her yet. You'll have to see what you can do with her."

"Why me? I don't know anything about children."

"Maybe that's why," Helen said dryly. "You're not likely to be so . . . involved as Francie."

He did not pretend to misunderstand her.

"Yes. Francie should have had half a dozen of her own. That's probably my fault. Our kind is dying out. We're becoming sterile."

"Nonsense," Helen said briskly. "And what is our kind, anyway?"

"Hard to define. The professional class? Upper-middle? One foot in the county and the other in trade. People who no longer have the staff to run a house comfortably, but know how it ought to be run. People who took their holidays abroad before the war as units, not in gangs. People with the smattering of culture required to fill in the

clues in the *Times* cross-word puzzle. That about sums us up, I think."

"And we're dying out?"

"We're dying out, and it's a pity," Geoffrey said firmly. "But never mind about that now. We can't do anything about it. How's Humphrey?"

"At an O.C.T.U. Having to use his brains, poor lamb. He writes me the most piteous letters."

They continued to talk about Humphrey, to whom Helen was engaged, until reaching the end of the garden and turning to retrace their steps they saw Francie signalling to them from the drawing-room window.

"What does she want?" Helen asked, waving back.

"She wants us to go in for a cup of coffee. But I think I'll have mine out here, in the greenhouse — I'm too muddy to come indoors without changing my shoes, and I can't be bothered to do that. You might suggest that Doreen brings it out to me. It would be one way of making her acquaintance."

"All right." She gave him a quick, intelligent look. "But don't be surprised if I bring it to you myself."

It did not occur to Doreen to make any objection when she was asked to take Mr. Osborne his coffee. In fact, she was pleased; she had looked forward to going into the garden and, particularly, into the little glass shed. Mrs. Osborne made her put on her coat and wrap a scarf round her neck, but she did not feel cold, though the warmth of the coffee was pleasant to her hand as she carefully held the cup on its saucer. Mrs. Osborne had said not to mind if she spilt it, but she didn't want to do that. Instinctively and unconsciously, she did not want to do anything which would make her more prominent and secretly observed than she already was. She

had never before been aware of exciting interest in grown-ups and it embarrassed her.

Mr. Osborne opened the door when he saw her coming and thanked her for bringing his coffee.

"Perhaps you'll wait while I drink it and take the cup back for me," he suggested. "Look, you can sit on that box — it isn't dirty."

He was standing up himself, propped against the shelf which ran round the walls. Doreen looked about her with discreet curiosity while he drank the coffee. There was a funny smell, she thought — rather like the smell of the upholstery in the car she had driven in overnight. There were a lot of flower-pots with earth in them but no flowers growing, and a tap in the corner which dripped, and a rusted watering-can. It was the kind of place where there might be earwigs, which she disliked, and she decided that it might not be a good idea to visit it alone. But at the moment she was content to sit on the upturned frame and make a mental inventory. If Edie was here, they could pretend it was their own house. Where the tap was could be the kitchen, the watering-can could be a kettle and the flower-pots, mugs.

"This is the greenhouse," Mr. Osborne said. "This is where I grow seeds in pots and boxes, ready to plant in the open when it's warm enough. Before the war I used to have it heated, but now I'm not allowed to."

"Why is it called a greenhouse when it's white?" Doreen asked.

"I don't know. I never thought about it before." He smiled suddenly. "You've stumped me."

Doreen returned his smile, though doubtfully, because she was not sure that she ought to have stumped him, so early in their acquaintance.

"Like to see my garden shed?" he went on.

"I've got to go there in a minute to fetch some carrots. If you took my cup for me now, you could ask Lucy for something to put the carrots in. You'll find me digging over there." He handed her the cup without waiting for her to reply.

Entirely happy, Doreen carried out her orders. Life was simple when someone told you what to do and you could do it without difficulty or constraint. She raced back with a garden trug and followed Geoffrey into the shed like an obedient puppy called to heel. The shed was even more interesting than the greenhouse. It smelt like an ironmonger's and its walls were completely covered with curious implements suspended on nails. Everything was very close together but very tidy. There was a wheel-barrow and a lawn-mower, there were bundles of tall sticks and onions strung like paper-chains. But she did not have time to examine any of this in detail, because Mr. Osborne went directly to a corner at the far end, where stood a box filled with sand. This was where the carrots were stored. Putting in your arm to fish them out was like dipping for presents in a bran-tub. One of them was a very queer shape, like a little man with two legs, and Mr. Osborne said she could have that one herself. She was to tell Lucy to cook it for her specially. But he said, also, that it was a pity that the carrot had two legs, because that showed that it had over-eaten, and perhaps if Doreen over-ate, she might have four legs. Doreen thought this very funny and she laughed.

They were both of them surprised: Doreen at the realisation that she was enjoying herself; Geoffrey at the change in Doreen. A hidden vitality and mischievousness came into her small, insignificant face and her brown eyes grew bright and expressive. She looked almost pretty. Helen had

been very unobservant in describing her as negative, he thought. Beneath her protective surface of colourless, timid acquiescence lay plenty of fire and intelligence. For the first time he felt something more for the child than a purely conscientious goodwill. He felt a certain challenge in her presence. To make Doreen happy, articulate and at ease would be something very well worth doing. Absently scooping the fine dry sand in the clamp and letting it run through his fingers, he resolved to succeed.

CHAPTER V

It did not surprise Francie to find that the child she had imagined and the child who had materialised should blend so smoothly. Because she had herself been docile, sensitive and timid, these seemed to her the normal characteristics of childhood. A lively, assertive, tough little girl would have bewildered her. From conscientiousness she would have given her the same solicitous attention, but her reward would not have been the pleasure that she gained from Doreen. It did not mar this pleasure that from the first Doreen responded more to Geoffrey than to her. She too loved Geoffrey.

Doreen turned to Geoffrey because his interest in her was impersonal. He wished her well but she had to behave well to retain his approval. If she were to show herself fractious, over-talkative or slow-witted, he would quickly become irritated and bored. Her instinctive understanding of this did not in any way detract from her regard for him; in fact, it strengthened it. He was a rather heroic figure in her eyes, a genial, godlike figure of unpredictable mood and speech. Francie, she had realised within twenty-four hours of her arrival at the house,

would tenderly forgive her anything she said or did. That was comforting and reassuring, and the primary emotion she felt towards Francie was gratitude. But there was an element of self-consciousness in her gratitude. Francie watched and was aware of her, she knew herself to be somehow important to Francie. Therefore she was less at ease with her.

At the end of the first week, the Osbornes congratulated each other on the fact that Doreen had completely settled down — giving half the credit to themselves and half to her. They meant that she now shared their meals and conversation with apparent unconcern, played with the dog, chattered to Lucy and did not cry herself to sleep. Since their standard of living and behaviour was an unconscious one, it did not occur to them that there could be anythig for Doreen to attain. It was simply a matter of overcoming a natural homesickness, and children were notoriously adaptable. They did not remotely suspect the state of tension in which Doreen lived from hour to hour or the watchfulness which lay behind her ready acquiescence. But Doreen watched and imitated and laboured to conform the whole time. She never once betrayed ignorance or expressed surprise. Her motives were not snobbish ones; for all her class-awareness, Mrs. Rawlings was not a snob and had not taught Doreen to be one; it was an instinct of self-preservation which bade her take on the protective colouring of her background. For as long as she was different, she was marked. Safety lay only in uniformity.

By the end of the second week, she had so well succeeded that Francie decided it was time to take her visiting. She would not begin by exposing her to the ordeal of a social call, since social calls had been a nightmare of her own childhood, but every Monday afternoon she had to tour the village selling

savings stamps and Doreen could accompany her. Let her believe that she was helping and she would not feel self-conscious under the regard, kindly but curious, of strangers. So Francie planned, and was happy in anticipation of displaying her charge. As a rule she dreaded Monday afternoons, finding it almost impossible to end up with the right amount of change and corresponding number of stamps.

Outside each house or cottage in the village, she told Doreen what to expect: "An old lady lives here who is rather deaf . . ." "Mrs. Dale has three children — you'll get to know them when you start school . . ." "Here's where Lucy lives . . ." And on each doorstep she introduced her: "I've got an assistant to-day. This is Doreen. She's come to stay with me while the raids are on." Almost everybody said the same things — kind, platitudinous things to which Doreen made shy, mumbled replies. Nevertheless, she enjoyed herself; she liked tearing off the stamps and being allowed to stick them in the little books; she liked helping Mrs. Osborne. It was interesting, too, to have the right to cross so many thresholds and see what houses looked like inside. Even when they didn't go right in, there was a lot to be seen through an open door. Some people had canaries hanging in cages and others had the heads of stuffed animals stuck up on the walls. Once they went into a sweet-shop and the woman behind the counter gave her a toffee. And all these interiors had different smells — musty, appetising, carbolic or just blended. She had never in her life before had such a feeling of enlarged experience. Mrs. Osborne must know almost everybody there was. At home they knew hardly anyone at all. Mum thought that people ought to keep themselves to themselves.

After about an hour of going from door to door,

they turned off the main village street and opened a wicket gate into a small garden which occupied the space in front of two adjoining cottages standing a little isolated from the rest. Each had a front door, but only one retained its bell and knocker.

"This is all one house," Mrs. Osborne explained. "Some friends of mine live here — Mr. and Mrs. Crossley. They're going to give us tea."

Before Doreen had time to wonder whether she would like this or not, the door had been opened by a woman dressed in corduroy trousers and an emerald green sweater, with a blue bandanna handkerchief tied round her head. She had a thick, pale skin, bright brown eyes and a prominent, curved nose. Doreen thought that she looked like a parrot — a rather untidy parrot with ruffled feathers.

"Hullo, Francie. Hullo, Doreen," she said in a deep, husky voice. "You're exhausted, I suppose — trying to gouge sixpences out of the tight-fisted peasantry. I've put the kettle on to boil and Tristram has made some scones."

The door through which they followed her, led directly into a long narrow room which occupied the width of both cottages. It was obvious even to Doreen that the conversion had been made simply by taking down the partition wall. There were two staircases and two doors leading to another room behind. This was the kitchen, from which Mr. Crossley appeared, carrying a plate. He was a desiccated, mild-eyed man with a receding hair-line and a Vandyke beard. Very much to Doreen's surprise, he wore a butcher's apron over flannel trousers and a pull-over.

"Excellent scones," he confirmed in a clear, thin voice. "In fact, I think they're the best I ever made." He turned to Doreen. "Can you cook?"

Doreen shook her head dumbly.

"What a pity. Everyone should know how to cook. That's what I tell my wife, but she pays no attention to me. She's a very undomesticated woman — I might almost say, a slattern."

Doreen looked appealingly at Francie, and Mrs. Crossley said lazily:

"Don't talk nonsense, Tristram — you'll embarrass the child. I can hear the kettle boiling over. Go and make the tea."

He went obediently, and Doreen thought that this was a very peculiar household, peculiar but interesting. Although it was true that she had been embarrassed, she did not long remain so. Her presence was so much taken for granted, she appeared to be so entirely accepted, that she ate her tea quite happily and felt free to ignore the conversation and take surreptitious stock of the room. The walls were hung with pictures and china masks. The pictures were landscapes, cool and delicate and uncrowded, but the masks were garish and a little frightening — their mouths sneered and their eyes condemned. Mr. Crossley was the pictures and Mrs. Crossley was the china masks; she knew that with certainty. Mrs. Crossley was the room in which she sat — untidy and colourful — and Mr. Crossley was the scrupulously neat kitchen she could see through the open door. She liked them both, but she was glad that it was not them she had come to live with.

"Do you like my pictures?" Mr. Crossley asked suddenly, his voice lowered to a murmur.

Doreen nodded that she did.

"What do you like about them?" he pressed her.

Only one word came into Doreen's mind and she was not sure whether it applied to what she felt about the pictures or about Mr. Crossley himself.

"They're nice and clean," she murmured back.

He looked very pleased.

"Good girl. That's clever of you. Come again one morning, when there's more light, and I'll show you my studio."

Doreen did not know what a studio was, but she appreciated being told that she was clever, even though she knew that she had only been clever by accident.

"I'll show you my workshop too," Mrs. Crossley broke in, in her warm, hoarse voice. "I don't call mine a studio. I'm purely commercial." She turned to Francie. "My dear, it's a tragedy — I'm overwhelmed with orders for this Christmas, more than ever before, and I can't carry out half of them. Hitler even interferes with art pottery. I'm sure it's just the kind of thing he would admire, too."

"What nonsense, Cynthia — you make lovely things," Francie protested loyally.

"If you really think so, darling, you've no taste," Cynthia said, grinning. "Ask Tristram. You never need bother to be polite to me. I work to pay the rent and buy the food that Tristram cooks. I'm not concerned with my artistic reputation."

"Perhaps I haven't any taste, but I admire them," Francie said stubbornly. "Show some of your figures to Doreen— the Piccadilly flower woman and the little girl with the balloons."

Smiling, indifferent, Cynthia complied. Doreen agreed with Francie — she thought them very pretty and much nicer than the masks. Before she left, Mrs. Crossley gave her a little blue vase, and she decided that she liked that better than anything. To be given a vase by someone who had made it was much more exciting than buying it in a shop. Mum would be ever so surprised when she wrote and told her. But she knew that she would never find the words in which to tell her of the circum-

stances of the gift. People like the Crossleys were as remote from her mother's experience as from her own, and instinctively she knew that what she liked about them would not please her mother.

It was almost an anticlimax to continue selling stamps after tea, and they were both tired by the time they returned to the house on the hill. Nevertheless, Francie was satisfied with the success of the excursion. Doreen had behaved well and done herself credit, and she thought that she had enjoyed herself also. With enjoyment would come trustfulness, and out of trustfulness, affection. It was not only for her own pleasure that Francie wanted Doreen's love. She believed sincerely that to love was to be happy; or perhaps, more exactly, she believed that it was impossible to be happy if one did not love. Life had no impersonalities for Francie.

Sitting side by side on the sofa, companionably serious, they counted stamps and money and found them to cancel out at the first attempt. Doreen's memory was detailed and exact; she knew already what amount each household had expended. Francie gave her a book of her own and a sixpenny stamp as wages.

"I'll give you one each week. You've earned it. I get into an awful muddle as a rule and think I've given wrong change."

Doreen found this confession strange. She had been brought up to believe in the omniscience of grown-ups.

"Can I help you every Monday, then?" she asked.

"Unless it interferes with school. You can always help me add up, anyhow."

"Shall we always have tea with that lady and gentleman?"

"Well, sometimes we might have tea with other friends of mine in the village. Mrs. Renshawe, for instance. She's the vicar's wife. She has some London children living with her too, but they're very little, only babies."

"How many are there?"

"I'm not sure — I think it's five."

"Five babies! Does she look after all them babies?"

"Oh, no. They have their mothers with them. There are three mothers."

Doreen looked away, and Francie regretted having mentioned children with their mothers. But Doreen said only:

"I like babies. I like pushing them in their prams."

"Well, perhaps you'll be allowed to push these sometimes."

"There was a baby where I lived in London," Doreen confided. "Her name's Shirley. But she's evacuated too. I wish my friend Edie was evacuated. I wish she was evacuated down here, then I could play with her."

Francie wondered for a moment if she were tacitly asking her to take in Edie also, but she decided that there was no guile in the remark.

"I expect you miss playing with all the children who were at school with you," she said sympathetically.

Doreen looked rather surprised.

"Oh no, I don't miss *them*. Mum didn't like me to play with other children in the street. I only played with Edie."

"What sort of games did you play?"

"Shops. And sleeping in the shelter. All sorts. We used to fold up bits of newspaper and make believe they was ration-books and cut out bits for coupons.

Edie thought of that." Her tone was vicariously proud.

"That *was* a good idea," Francie said gently. She hoped that Doreen would go on talking. She had never before maintained a conversation for so long.

"When I go home I'll tell her about selling saving stamps. We could play I was the person called with the stamps and Edie could pretend to buy them."

"You might use the bits of stamp-paper instead of real stamps," Francie suggested. "You could start collecting them."

"Shall I? Shall I start now?" Her eyes brightened with excitement.

"I'll give you an envelope to keep them in."

Geoffrey found them thus engaged. He insisted on sticking one piece on the tip of Doreen's nose. Giggling, she tried to evade him and the scuffle was only ended by Lucy's appearance to announce that her supper was waiting for her in the kitchen. Geoffrey looked after her with a smile.

"How did you work the miracle? That child is becoming almost human."

"She's getting used to us, that's all."

"Funny if in our efforts to make her feel at home we make her thoroughly unruly. I don't think her mother would be pleased."

"Oh, I expect she's always like that with her mother," Francie said with conviction. "That reminds me—I've had a letter from Helen. She can't come to us for Christmas. Humphrey's people want her to spend it with them, and there's just a possibility he might get leave then. So I've been thinking . . ." She hesitated.

"Yes?" Geoffrey prompted her.

"Could you bear it if we asked Mrs. Rawlings

down instead? It will be so miserable for her otherwise. And Doreen would be so thrilled."

She looked at him with anxious expectancy and saw him grimace.

"Oh Lord. It won't be at all the sort of Christmas I'd imagined. However — peace on earth and goodwill to all men. It's what we ought to do, obviously."

"I'll write and ask her before I mention it to Doreen," Francie said eagerly, "in case she makes any objection. But I'm sure she won't."

"You realise, don't you," Geoffrey said, "that it will raise a delicate social problem? Is Mrs. Rawlings going to take her meals with us?"

"Would you mind very much?" Francie asked diffidently.

"No, I shouldn't mind very much, but I think Mrs. Rawlings might mind — and Lucy."

"It is a bit awkward, I realise that. But I don't see what else we can do. Lucy won't be here much over the holiday and she's too simple to be superior, anyhow. I want to give Doreen a real Christmas, with crackers and decorations and all the fun possible in war-time. It would be so snubbing to suddenly banish them both to the kitchen."

"Well, we'll hope for the best. It's up to Mrs. Rawlings, really. If she's a woman of sense, she'll see it herself from the child's point of view. Don't look so worried, darling. I'll do my stuff, as Helen would say; everything short of kissing the woman under the mistletoe."

Francie kissed him instead.

"Thank you, my love. You're very helpful. Will Helen object, do you think?"

"Helen will be cynically amused. She thinks we're crazy anyhow."

But Francie was no longer listening. She was

realising, with surprise and self-contempt, that she already feared this visit which she had pleaded to bring about. Deliberately and of her own accord, she was going to put herself on approbation, as it were. No mother as fanatically devoted as Mrs. Rawlings would be likely to applaud another woman's methods with her child, yet it was terribly important that she should approve of everything. For otherwise she might take Doreen away, and already, Francie recognised with sadness, she loved her far too well to want to part with her.

CHAPTER VI

In the train going down to spend Christmas with Doreen, Mrs. Rawlings re-read her last letter: "Darling Mum,

"I am quite well and I hope you are quite well. I am looking forward to seeing you at Xmas. I wrote to Edie but she did not answer. Thank you for the stockings. Mrs Osborne took me to Wychmore yesterday and we went to Mr Osbornes office and he took us to lunch in a shop. Mac hurt his leg but it is better. I helped Mr O pick brussel sprouts. Did you know they grew on sticks.

"Much love from

"Doreen."

It did not tell her a great deal, but her eyes lingered on one sentence: "I wrote to Edie but she did not answer." What was she going to say to Doreen about Edie?

For Edie was dead, killed by a fragment of shell-casing on her way to the shelter one evening. Mrs. Rawlings had gone to her funeral and had tried sincerely not to feel too thankful that it had been another woman's child. But with the egotism of

the single-minded she could not help viewing the tragedy principally as it affected her. It was a warning. This, God said, was what might have happened to *you*. Sitting in the train, on her way to receive the Osbornes' hospitality and enjoy the bitter-sweetness of a brief reunion with Doreen, she pledged herself to gratitude. No matter what she found to disapprove of, she would remember Edie and be grateful. Only if Doreen were unhappy . . . But she put that thought away from her. She did not believe that Doreen was unhappy. Of course she missed her mother and this visit would upset her for a bit, but she would settle down again. These people were kind to her. Mrs. Rawlings could not doubt it.

Francie had let Doreen go alone to meet her mother's train. She walked down to the station with her, but left her sitting in the hired car beside Truffitt, the owner-driver, who had become a friend of hers. The train was late and Doreen sighed and fidgeted and climbed in and out of the car half a dozen times to go and look at the station clock and see if the signal had changed to green. Truffitt regarded her with tolerant amusement. He took it for granted that children should be restless and excitable and it did not occur to him that Doreen had changed a great deal in a few weeks. Her docile, negative passivity had gone. It was weapon of defence which she had unconsciously discarded. Shopping with Francie in the village, helping Geoffrey in the garden at week-ends, running across the winter fields with Mac barking at her side, she had forgotten to post sentries of reserve and silence. With a child's chameleon adaptability she had acquired the colour of her new background. She was the daughter of the house, petted by Francie, teased by Geoffrey, exercising an affectionate

authority over Lucy's giggling simplicity. She was as much at ease as she had been at home, and her domain was wider.

When the train drew in, she scrambled out of the car for the last time and ran to the barrier. She saw her mother at once and a spasm of devotion nearly choked her. Darling, darling Mum! She threw her arms round her waist, nearly over-balancing her with the boisterousness of her welcome. Mrs. Rawlings disengaged herself a little awkwardly, glancing round quickly as though to see if they had been observed. She was pleased by Doreen's greeting, but slightly disconcerted too. It wasn't like Doreen to be so worked up. Then her momentary hesitation was borne under by a wave of happiness. The weeks had been so long, the days and nights so lonely. She looked at her hungrily and contentedly, marking the colour in her cheeks and the tell-tale shortness of her clothes. She had grown, there was no doubt about it. There'd be work to do tomorrow, letting down some hems. Unnoticing, unresisting, she let herself be pulled across the station yard to the waiting car. Truffitt, grinning, put her suitcase in beside her and shut the door on them. For a brief, strange instant Mrs. Rawlings's thoughts went back to another day when a chauffeur, grinning, had closed a car door on her and on someone else. But this was not the moment to remember Doreen's father.

"Look, quick, Mum, there's the school," Doreen pointed. "That's where I'm going next term. Lucy's brothers and sisters go there and Lucy says I can walk with them." She leaned forward and waved. "That's Mrs. Hennessy. She keeps the baker's shop. I buy sweets there sometimes — she sells a lot of things. Do you know, there isn't any greengrocer's? Everybody grows their own vegetables in this place.

Mr. Osborne says I can give you some to take back with you, so you won't have to wait in the queue. Now we've got to the end of the village. It takes much longer when you walk. There's only fields now and it's all up-hill. Mr. Osborne used to drive his own motor-car, but now he's not allowed the petrol. But the car's still there in the garage. It's an Alvis. He lets me sit in it sometimes, just for fun, and I pretend I'm driving it. I pretend you're sitting beside me, Mum, and I'm taking you for a ride in the country."

"Do you, love?" Mrs. Rawlings murmured. "That's nice."

Inwardly she was astonised. She had never in her life heard Doreen run on like this before. She hoped she didn't always talk so much and worry Mr. and Mrs. Osborne with her chatter. But perhaps it was only the excitement.

"We're going to have turkey for dinner to-morrow," Doreen exalted. "And Christmas pudding. I helped Mrs. Osborne make it. I stirred it three times round and wished. Do you know what I wished, Mum?"

"You mustn't tell or it won't come true."

"That's what Mrs. Osborne said." But she was disappointed; she was proud of her wish. "If it does come true, I can tell you after, can't I? I think Mrs. Osborne put threepenny bits in the pudding, but she wouldn't say. It's a secret. There's a lot of secrets. My present for you's a secret. Don't you wish you knew what it was?" she teased. "It's quite small. I made it myself. But it's nicer than anything I made at school."

"I've got a present for you too," Mrs. Rawlings smiled. "Done up in my case."

"Oh, I wish it was tomorrow! No, I don't, though, because then it would be 'tomorrow' you

was going back. Can't you stop a bit longer, Mum? They wouldn't mind."

"Who'd clean the office Friday, if I wasn't there?"

"Oh, bother the old office. Miss Osborne is angry because they aren't going to stay shut till Monday. She said so in a letter and Mrs. Osborne read it out at breakfast."

"Do you have your breakfast with them?" Mrs. Rawlings asked, startled.

"Oh yes. I have breakfast with Mr. Osborne and Mrs. Osborne, and then Mr. Osborne goes to Wychmore, and I have lunch with Mrs. Osborne, and tea, and then I have supper early in the kitchen with Lucy. Except on Saturdays and Sundays, and then Mr. Osborne's home to lunch and tea too."

"I hope you behave properly and don't make yourself a nuisance," Mrs. Rawlings said heavily. She was not sure that she approved of the arrangement. She had supposed that Doreen had all her meals in the kitchen.

"I think so." Doreen looked a little anxious. "I don't spill anything. Well, once I did, but that was because Mac jumped up at me and Mrs. Osborne said that wasn't my fault. It was just naughty old Mac being greedy." Her face cleared at the recollection.

There was no time to say more, for they had arrived. The size of the house and the extent of the garden impressed Mrs. Rawlings and impressed her favourably. The slight uneasiness occasioned her by Doreen's almost exaggerated self-confidence was forgotten. It was a lovely home for Doreen — she could see that. Here was something different to the sort of place where ordinary evacuees got billeted. Her face showed nothing, but her heart swelled with satisfaction and vicarious pride of ownership.

Truffitt put down her suitcase in the porch, smiled at Doreen and was gone before Mrs. Rawlings had time to consider if she ought to pay him. Somewhere in the house, a dog barked furiously.

"It's only Mac," Doreen said reassuringly. "He doesn't bite."

Lucy opened the door and Doreen introduced her.

"This is Lucy — this is my Mum. Can I take her upstairs and show her where she's going to sleep, Lucy?"

"Mrs. Osborne said to go straight up. She'll be with you in a minute," Lucy grinned.

"I'll carry your bag, Mum. Oh, it's heavy! Is that my present?"

"You leave that bag to me."

Doreen raced ahead up the stairs and flung open the door of the bedroom.

"Do you like it, Mum? I helped Mrs. Osborne make the bed for you, and I picked the flowers in the vase. Now put down your bag and come and look at my room." She seized her hand and almost dragged her across the landing. "Look, I've got a whole row of books. I've read that and that and that, and I'm going to read all the others. The rug's blue — do you see? And there's where I keep my clothes."

Mrs. Rawlings had crossed to the window and was looking out at the village in the valley below.

"It's a long way from the school and a stiff pull up that hill," she thought aloud.

"Mrs. Osborne says she thinks I'd better have my lunch with Lucy's mother when I start school," Doreen rattled on. "Then I won't have the walk twice a day. She'll probably take me and fetch me, she says; she'll see how it works out."

Well, they've certainly got things all arranged,

Mrs. Rawlings told herself resentfully. From the way Doreen talked, you'd think she was going to be here for life. Of course, the raids weren't over yet, by any manner of means, although it seemed to be the provinces that were getting it worst for the time being. But that wasn't any reason for carrying on as if they'd adopted the child. She'd soon put a stop to that kind of talk. Some people — give 'em an inch and they'd take an ell. But it was a nice room — it was nice for Doreen to have a room to herself. There was no doubt she'd learn a lot from being with people like these Osbornes. And they meant well, like enough. You could tell they'd done their best to make the child at home.

She was still looking out of the window when Francie emerged from her own room and stood hesitating in the doorway of Doreen's. Doreen saw her standing there, and for the first time for quite a long while she suddenly felt shy and ill at ease. The shadow which had fallen on her four years ago, the shadow of adult dissention and recrimination, put out a long dark finger and touched her heart. She did not recognise it consciously and she had never given it the substance of a name, but the remembrance of it lingered and had left its mark. People angry, people hurting each other . . . Keep very quiet, pretend you don't notice, withdraw.

Then Francie had come forward and was greeting Mrs. Rawlings, shaking her limp hand. They were both smiling, smiling at each other and at Doreen, and the moment of tension was over. At once she forgot all about it. It was Christmas Eve and Mum was here, and there was everything in the world to show her and to tell her.

By the time they had had tea, it was dusk — too late to go into the garden. Francie left them alone together in the drawing-room, with the excuse

of helping Lucy prepare dinner, to enable her to leave early. She thought that they probably had a lot to say to each other, more than she could find to say to Mrs. Rawlings. After they had discussed Doreen's growth, compared the differences between food shortages in London and the country and touched lightly on air-raids, topics of mutual interest appeared to have come to an end. She would probably say more about Doreen, Francie decided, when the child herself was not present. There were quite a lot of things she wanted to talk over with her.

. Immediately they were alone together, Doreen asked:

"How's Edie, Mum? I wrote her a letter, but she never answered." She was sitting on the floor at her mother's feet.

Mrs. Rawlings opened her hand-bag and pretended to be looking for something in it.

"She's gone away," she said. "They've all gone. There's new people coming in below."

"But, Mum!" She swung round to stare at her, her face flushed with the heat of the fire. "Why didn't you write and tell me? Where've they gone? Have they gone to the country?"

"Yes they've gone to the country. To Devonshire," she elaborated. "I reckon we won't see them no more."

"But I sent Edie a Christmas card! I made it myself. Won't she get it now?"

"Well, somebody might forward it," Mrs. Rawlings said, vaguely. "But I shouldn't count on it." Then touched by the blank dismay in Doreen's face, she added: "Don't take it to heart. There's plenty of others in the world. You'll make some friends down here, I would'nt be surprised."

"I'll always like Edie best," Doreen mourned. "I wish she'd have answered my letter."

Mrs. Rawlings turned away abruptly and surveyed the room. It reminded her of one in a house where she had been in service before her marriage; everything good, but worn a little shabby. The chairs needed new covers and there was the mark of a burn on the hearth-rug. Still there was obviously plenty of money about, by her standards, anyhow. The reflection gave her a sour satisfaction. Doreen was getting something here that she herself would probably never be able to give her. Let her make the most of it. It made a nice change from two rooms in the attic and a kitchen on the landing.

"You'll have no one to be with in the shelter now," Doreen said suddenly, pursuing her own reflections.

"I don't sleep there no longer. I got fed up with it."

"But Mum, the shelter's *safe!*"

"I'm safe enough — you needn't worry. If things get noisy, I go downstairs to Mrs. Freeman. She's glad of the company. She's got a sofa and I sleep on that. Sometimes we make a cup of tea."

"I thought you didn't like Mrs. Freeman. You said once she was a silly old fool."

"Well, I don't like air-raids, come to that. It isn't what you like now, it's what you've got to put up with. I don't mind as long as you're all right. You're happy here, aren't you, Doreen? They treat you properly?"

"Oh *yes*. But I wish you was here always, Mum. I wish you didn't have to stop in London."

"London's where I'd rather be. I never fancied living in the country. And anyhow, the raids won't last for ever. Then you can come home and be with your old Mum again. You'll like that, won't you, love?" Her voice was very tender.

Doreen rubbed her cheek against her mother's knee.

"Yes. Yes, of course. I love you best, Mum."

Since he had been obliged to put up his car, Geoffrey cycled to and from the station every day. He would almost certainly have been granted a petrol allowance on the plea of ill-health, but the sensitive obstinacy which was a part of his character forbade him to make the application. He did not consider that merchant seamen should risk a ghastly death in tankers to enable asthmatic country solicitors to lead easier lives. As a result, he was always very tired by the time he had wheeled his bicycle up the last steep stretch of hill-side to the gate of the drive.

Doreen had formed the habit of going to meet him halfway down the hill — "to help push." She knew the time his train arrived from Wychmore and she would swing on the gate until she saw him coming. This little ceremony had charm and significance for them both. Geoffrey found that he looked forward to the sight of Doreen's flying approach and the barrage of conversation which she opened at several yards' range. It was not the same as being greeted by a child of one's own, but it was endearing and flattering none the less. Doreen did not analyse her pleasure. She had forgotten the relationship between father and child.

This evening she went to meet him as usual, accompanied by Mac. When the Aberdeen's noisy welcome had been quieted and Doreen had answered Geoffrey's question — Yes, her mother had arrived safely; yes, they had had their tea and Mum thought she had grown — she fell silent. He glanced sideways at her soft, indeterminate profile and saw that she was frowning and her mouth was set. She had forgotten to push, too, and her hand only rested on the saddle.

"What's up?" he asked lightly. "You're very quiet, all of a sudden."

"I was just thinking." Unconsciously she sighed. "My friend Edie's gone away. To the country. I wrote her a letter, but she never answered and Mum reckons she won't get the Christmas card I sent her. Mum reckons I won't ever see her again." Her voice trembled.

"Bad luck. But I expect you will. Perhaps she'll send *you* a Christmas card, with her new address on it."

"Do you think she will?" Doreen looked encouraged. "I didn't think of that."

"It's highly probable, I should say. The posts are always very delayed around Christmas."

She smiled at him then, gratefully and affectionately. She had a pretty smile. Geoffrey felt a little appalled at this fresh evidence of what he had already recognised as one of Doreen's strongest characteristics: she had a loving and a faithful heart. It was, he thought, a delightful characteristic and the quality which in Francie charmed him most; but he believed that it was one which brought much suffering to its possessor.

"Excited about tomorrow?" he asked to change the subject.

She nodded and her smile became amused and gleeful.

"After you've had your supper tonight, slip along to my study and help me wrap my presents, will you? I'll need a finger for the string."

"Does she know what you're going to give her?"

"Of course she doesn't. What do you take me for?"

"Perhaps I'll tell her," Doreen teased.

"Perhaps you jolly well won't!"

He pretended to aim a blow at her and she evaded him, shouting with laughter, and raced ahead to open the gate. Mrs. Rawlings watched them from the porch.

Geoffrey met her unembarrassed by any of Francie's doubts and scruples. He felt his relationship with her to be a perfectly ordinary and clear-cut one, and as a result he communicated this attitude of mind to Mrs. Rawlings and she decided that he was a very pleasant, easy gentleman, though delicate-looking. He asked after his sister and then, as she was not in the room with them, went on to speak of Doreen.

"She's a dear child — we're both very fond of her."

"I do hope she isn't a lot of trouble, sir. She's always been brought up to think of others besides herself."

"She does you credit, Mrs. Rawlings. My wife and I are always congratulating ourselves on our good fortune."

"Of course she's a bit timid-like," Mrs. Rawlings said deprecatingly, to hide her pleasure in his words.

"Yes, she was very timid at first, but it has worn off. She soon learned that nobody was going to bite her. I'd rather have a shy child than a bumptious one, anyhow. And she's very intelligent."

Mrs. Rawlings glowed.

"I'm glad you think so, sir. Her teacher always said she might go far."

"She'll begin school again here, after the Christmas holidays, of course. There didn't seem much point in her joining a class in the middle of a term and I thought, besides, that it was better to give her time to adjust herself to a different home life before she had to face a new school too. I hope you agree with me?"

"Oh yes, sir. I think you acted for the best."

She hesitated, half inclined to take the opportunity of reminding him that the arrangement, in any case, would only be a temporary one, yet not wanting to appear ungracious. But Geoffrey went on speaking, not noticing the shadow of her doubt.

"I'm glad you managed to get down for Christmas. Both for your sake and Doreen's. She misses you and you must certainly miss her."

"I do, sir, that's a fact."

To her horror she felt her eyes fill with tears and she had to look away to hide them. What a pleasant gentleman, she thought again. Miss Osborne was good-natured enough, but not a patch on her brother. She had reserved her judgment on Mrs. Osborne. Though neither of them was aware of it, Francie's eager, faintly placating manner, the unconscious expression of her sensitive, affectionate desire to be liked, was in itself a challenge to a side of Mrs. Rawlings's nature which despised all weakness and enjoyed intimidating it.

When it was time for Doreen to have her earlier, lighter meal in the kitchen before going to bed, her mother said firmly that, if Mrs. Osborne would excuse her, she would eat with Doreen now and go to bed early herself.

"But Mrs. Rawlings!" Francie protested, dismayed. "Scrambled eggs won't be nearly enough for you after a journey and a tiring day. I've cooked the weekly joint to-night, as we're having a turkey tomorrow. We dine at half-past seven and you can go to bed directly afterwards."

"It's very kindly thought of, m'am," Mrs. Rawlings reiterated, "but I'd rather have a bite with Doreen now and settle early. It's what I'm used to. What with packing my case and locking up at home, I was up by five this morning and I'm not much

used to travelling. So if it's not putting you out, m'am . . ."

Francie gave in. She had to be content with hovering anxiously round the kitchen while Doreen and her mother supped together, and then hovering anxiously round Mrs. Rawlings's bedroom, pointing out where extra blankets could be found and bedside biscuits and the electric fire. Her conscience was uneasy because her relief was great. She had been dreading having dinner with Mrs. Rawlings minus the protection of Doreen.

"But why?" Geoffrey demanded when she confessed to him. "After all, it was your own idea. Personally, I find her quite easy to talk to."

"You're not shy and I am," Francie sighed. "And Mrs. Rawlings scares me. There's something about her . . . She makes me feel embarrassed in my own house. I'm sure she thinks I'm not looking after Doreen properly, or else that I'm taking too much on myself, or something. . . ."

"Nonsense, darling. In my opinion, Mrs. Rawlings behaved with great good sense. I only wish she'd exercise it further and stop addressing us as 'sir' and 'm'am'. We had enough trouble teaching Doreen not to call you 'miss' all the time."

"I wouldn't mind that if I didn't feel it was a a kind of mock respect and that inwardly she thinks I'm just a poor fish," Francie said, with unusual shrewdness. "She likes you, Geoffrey, but I'm certain she doesn't like me."

"Then she lacks elementary judgment," Geoffrey said gallantly, "and doesn't deserve further consideration. It's only for two more days, anyhow. And Doreen's happy."

"Yes, Doreen's happy." Francie smiled.

Lying in bed upstairs, waiting for her mother to come out of the bathroom and say good night,

Doreen was, in fact, happier than she had perhaps ever been in her life before. A deep, deep content welled up in her, compounded of joy in the present and acutely pleasurable anticipation of the immediate future. For the moment she had forgotten Edie, and there was no other shadow nearer than the day after tomorrow — and that was a long way off. Drowsy with delight, her eyelids kept closing. Finally they remained closed. When her mother came into her room, Doreen was already asleep.

Mrs. Rawlings turned off the light and sat beside her bed for quite a long while, in darkness except for the chink of yellow underneath the door. Only when sounds below gave warning that her host and hostess had risen from dinner did she stealthily withdraw from Doreen's room and cross the landing to her own.

CHAPTER VII

FRANCIE rose early the following morning, having everything to do without Lucy's aid (Lucy stayed at home to help her mother on occasions of feasting and rejoicing) and she was pleasurably surprised to be joined in the kitchen by Mrs. Rawlings. In reply to her rather weak protests that she ought to take the chance to rest in bed, Mrs. Rawlings said firmly that she hadn't the habit of sleeping late and she was fine and rested, thank you. She borrowed an apron and proceeded to sweep and dust the dining-room while Francie cooked breakfast. Working together, the two women found themselves more in accord. They exchanged remarks through the service hatch and mapped out the day ahead. Presents after breakfast, Francie thought, and then preparations for midday dinner. She herself intended

to go to church at evensong and her husband would probably call on some friends in the village after tea. Mrs. Rawlings and Doreen were free to do exactly as they liked.

"I believe Doreen wants to take our Christmas presents to Lucy and her family some time today. She's hoping you will go with her, if you can face walking back up the hill. But perhaps you had planned to go to church yourself?"

"I've got out of the way of church-going," Mrs. Rawlings said with a shade of apology in her voice. "I was never much of an attender and now I've lost the habit entirely, as you might say—thank you all the same, m'am."

"You don't mind my taking Doreen with me on Sundays? She seems to like to go."

"Yes, she likes it. She used to go to Sunday School. It does you good when you're young, that's what I say." She did not explain at what age the prophylactic quality wore off, nor did Francie dare to ask.

Her task completed, Mrs. Rawlings went upstairs to rouse Doreen. In spite of what Francie had said about presents after breakfast, she intended to give Doreen her own at once. It was a large and extremely expensive doll, dressed in a rose-pink silk frock, complete with under-garments, shoes and socks—such a doll as only children at completely opposite ends of the social scale receive. She sat it at the foot of Doreen's bed before she woke her. Doreen saw it as her eyes opened and she remembered instantly what it signified. Christmas Day and Mum here! She hugged the doll with one arm and her mother with the other.

"What are you going to call it?" Mrs. Rawlings asked, pleased with her pleasure.

Doreen hesitated. The first name that came

into her head was Edie's, but some obscure and undefined emotion prevented her from speaking it. She no longer wanted to talk about Edie.

"I think I'll call her Hermie," she said finally. "Because that's the name of a girl in a book I read. Hermie Rawlings. That sounds nice. Do you like it, Mum?"

"It'll do well enough," Mrs. Rawlings assured her indulgently. "And now hurry up and dress. Breakfast's nearly ready and there's more presents waiting for you after that."

"That's when I'm going to give you mine! *And* I've got presents for Mr. Osborne aud Mrs. Osborne and Lucy."

She jumped out of bed and ran into the bathroom, colliding with Geoffrey, who was shaving in his dressing-gown.

"Happy Christmas!" he greeted her, lathering her nose. "You can wash at the basin in your mother's room this morning. The bathroom's mine."

"You're going to be awfully late," Doreen chided him.

"Yes, I am, and no one is allowed to open any presents till I come — so scram."

The morning which had begun so auspiciously continued to be satisfactory in every way. Doreen presented her mother with an embroidered tray-cloth, Francie with a raffia table-mat and Geoffrey with a packet of pipe-cleaners. She received a book from Francie and from Geoffrey a gift which he had gone to enormous trouble to obtain from a London store. It was a small tent, wigwam-shaped. Francie had not altogether approved; she had had a sensitive fear of appearing to outdo Mrs. Rawlings in expenditure on Doreen and had purposely limited her own. But Geoffrey had swept aside these niceties and

chosen something to please himself. He believed that he was buying it for Doreen, but in fact it was an offering to his own childhood.

"You can put it up in the garden on fine days," he explained. "Have tea in it, if you like — invite your friends in. It's all yours and nobody can come in unless you ask them."

Doreen had turned extremely pale; she looked as though she might be going to burst into tears. For the moment she loved Geoffrey more than anyone else in the world.

"Say thank you, Doreen," Mrs. Rawlings prompted reprovingly.

"Thank you, Mr. Osborne," Doreen breathed.

Her mother thought this scarcely adequate, but Geoffrey was well satisfied with the reception of his gift. He now lost interest in the proceedings, though Doreen had still to open a paint-box from Helen, a painting-book from Lucy (by arrangement) and sweets from Mrs. Freeman in the basement flat at home. The table became littered with brown paper and string, trailing in the marmalade and sucking up the dregs of tea. Doreen wanted everyone to have a sweet and everyone refused politely. It was a very ordinary breakfast scene on Christmas Day, but not to Doreen.

For the rest of the morning Francie and Mrs. Rawlings worked hard, Geoffrey pottered in the garden and Doreen erected her tent on the lawn. It was too cold to sit in it, even with a ground-sheet down, but she arranged her new possessions inside and used it as headquarters in her games. She was pretending that it was a toy-shop and that she was buying Christmas presents for her little girl when Mrs. Rawlings came to fetch her to wash her hands for lunch. Doreen saw her coming and hurried to close the flap.

"You have to open the door yourself," she called out. "This is a shop."

Mrs. Rawlings pushed her way in without any pretence of joining in the game. She looked about her and a jealousy she did not own to sharpened her voice.

"It's a nice toy and must have cost a mint of money, but I wonder where Mr. Osborne thinks you're going to stick it when you're back home? It'll be a fair nuisance, cluttering up the place."

"P'raps I could take it in the park," Doreen faltered.

"The other kids'd pull it to pieces in half an hour. *You* know that. Oh well, it was kindly meant and you'll enjoy it while you're here. Look sharp now — Mrs. Osborne's dishing up."

"I'm not sure I want my dinner," Doreen said in a small voice. "I feel a bit sick, Mum."

"You've never been eating them sweets all the morning! I told you you wasn't to touch them."

"I haven't eaten one, Mum — honest."

"Well then, you're only hungry and you don't know it. No more of that nonsense about feeling sick. Mrs. Osborne's taken a lot of trouble. You wait till you see the table!"

In fact, the sight of the table, decorated with crackers and a miniature Christmas-tree, dispelled Doreen's sudden malaise. She forgot, because she had not recognized, its cause. She ate two helpings of turkey and was fortunate enough to find a horse-shoe and a threepenny-bit in her slice of pudding. They all four helped to clear away and wash up. Then Geoffrey said that he was going to sleep it off, Francie said she had some letters to write and Doreen and her mother set off for the village to call on Lucy.

Mrs. Warman, Lucy's mother, lived in a cottage at the foot of the hill, before one came to the school

and the station and the remainder of the village straggling along the valley. Although a model worker in other people's houses, fiercely competed for at spring-cleaning, she took very little trouble with her own home, as Mrs. Rawlings immediately noticed. The garden, large in proportion to the cottage, was well-tilled by Mr. Warman, who was an agricultural labourer, but within doors all was chaos. Four children younger than Lucy led uninhibited lives in four small rooms; this excluded Mr. and Mrs. Warman's own bedroom, which was sacrosanct. Today the entire family, numbering seven, was gathered in the general living-room, from which the kitchen led off. The windows were closed and a rich smell of food thickened the air still further. The children were already bickering over their new toys, but their parents did not interfere in this familiar running skirmish unless the issue came to actual blows or shricks. They were all, in truth, very fond of one another, in spite of superficial appearances.

Into this atmosphere of cordial frowst, Doreen and her mother were warmly welcomed. Doreen handed over the Osbornes' presents to the family and her own to Lucy. The children drew her into their games and Mrs. Warman turned her attention to Mrs. Rawlings. Lucy, although eighteen, was tacitly included with her younger brothers and sisters and played much as they did. Mr. Warman slept.

"You're just down for the holiday?" Mrs. Warman asked knowing the answer already.

"Yes, just till tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, it's not long but worth it, I'm sure. Doreen's a good little girl — we're all right fond of her. I tell my lot they ought to take example from her."

Mrs. Warman had her own pronunciation of Doreen and called it D'reen.

"It's easier with one," Mrs. Rawlings said politely.

"You're right about that." Mrs. Warman laughed fatly. Then she lowered her voice. "How does she get on up the hill?"

"She's happy enough," Mrs. Rawlings replied guardedly. "They're very good to her. Of course it's not the same as being in your own home," she added.

"That's what I said to Lucy. It can't be the same, I said. Though Mr. and Mrs. Osborne are very well-meaning, I will say that. Treat her like their own daughter, by all accounts. She sits down to all her meals with them, our Lucy says."

"Yes."

"My lot wouldn't care for that," Mrs. Warman chuckled. "They wouldn't fancy being on their best behaviour all the time. But then — they haven't the nice manners your Doreen has."

Mrs. Rawlings was perfectly aware by now that Mrs. Warman resented the favour shown to Doreen and desired, subconsciously, to deflate any satisfaction her mother might be feeling over the arrangement. Her natural reaction was to champion it.

"Well, it's not for ever and I reckon I'm lucky to have had the offer. I've heard some funny tales in my time about the kind of treatment children get away from home these days. It's a lot to me to know she's welcome. And safe from the bombs. Her friend's been killed since Doreen went away. I haven't told her yet. I didn't want to spoil her Christmas for her."

"There now!" Mrs. Warman sounded rather contrite. "Killed by a bomb, was she?"

"Shrapnel. An only child too. Doreen'd fair break her heart if she was to know."

"It must be terrible," Mrs. Warman murmured

vaguely. "Many's the time I've said, we can't rightly imagine it, safe here in the country. Not that we haven't had a taste of it ourselves. Only five miles away they dropped a whole load of them incendiaries a couple of months back. Caught a haystack and made a proper blaze."

Mrs. Rawlings did not deign to answer this. In any case, she thought that she had been inveigled into talking too much and she regretted having mentioned Edie. She did not trust Mrs. Warman to hold her tongue.

"We ought to be getting back. It's a fair pull up that hill and Mrs. Osborne said tea at half-past four."

"You'll excuse Mr. Warman not waking. He has to get up at five to milk."

Both women rose and Doreen was summoned from her game. Under cover of the babble of good-byes, Mrs. Rawlings found an opportunity to ask:

"You won't say nothing to Doreen about Edie getting killed?"

"Indeed I wouldn't dream of such a thing," Mrs. Warman assured her earnestly and sincerely.

Then they were outside the door at last and walking up the hill.

"Lucy liked my present," Doreen said happily.

"You didn't tell me she was simple."

"What's simple mean?"

"A ha'penny short. Not all there."

"Oh, Mum, she's *not*. She's ever so nice."

"I dare say. But she's simple, for all that." She spoke harshly, venting on Lucy her annoyance with her mother.

"Well, I like her," Doreen maintained in a subdued voice. "She often brings me sweets."

"You didn't ought to eat a lot of cheap sweets," Mrs. Rawlings countered automatically.

Tea was a rather quiet meal. There was an iced cake, but appetites were languid. Now it was the Osbornes' turn to go out and the Rawlings' to stay at home. Francie went to evensong and Geoffrey to have a drink with the Crossleys. Mrs. Rawlings settled down to mend Doreen's clothes and Doreen read. The special feeling of Christmas Day had departed. It was just another Sunday.

Running her hand down Doreen's woollen stockings. Mrs. Rawlings sighed sharply. What darns! Real botches, they were. She'd have to cut them out and do them over again.

"Does that Lucy mend your clothes?" she asked.

Doreen looked up from her book, surprised.

"No, Mrs. Osborne mends them for me."

"Well, I'm sorry for Mr. Osborne if she darns his socks like she's darned these stockings of yours. Shocking, they are. I'll have to do them all over again."

Doreen sat very still, but her face, from forehead to neck, grew slowly scarlet and her eyes filled with tears. Mrs. Rawlings, unnoticing, snipped away angrily with her scissors. Little bits of black wool fell on the floor beside her.

"I think you're very unkind," Doreen said at last in a strangled voice.

Mrs. Rawlings looked up quickly and stared at her in astonishment.

"What did you say?"

"I think it's very unkind to say that about Mrs. Osborne's darning. She hates darning. She only does it because I can't do it myself. I don't mind if they're a bit bumpy." Her voice shook.

Extreme pain roused Mrs. Rawlings to extreme anger. She felt as if Doreen had hit her a stinging blow across the face.

"How dare you talk to me like that! You're a rude, ungrateful little girl. You ought to be ashamed of yourself — on Christmas Day and all. I shall wish I hadn't come to see you."

Doreen burst into tears. Her heart beat violently from the enormous effort she had used to make her protest. It had been the most courageous act of her whole life, and she would have given anything to recall her words. Now she had upset Mum and upset herself and everything was beastly. She sobbed on miserably.

"You'd better go to bed," her mother said coldly. "You don't want to be caught like that. Maybe you'll come to your senses if you're left alone."

"What will They think?" Doreen whispered.

"They'll think you're a silly, spoilt child that doesn't deserve all the kindness that's been shown you. I've never known you speak so rude before. If that's the way you've learned to talk down here, I'd best take you back to London, bombs or no bombs."

"I'm sorry, Mum," Doreen said thickly. "I didn't mean to be rude. It was only . . ." She began to cry again, hiding her face in the chair.

Mrs. Rawlings stood up with an exclamation of impatience and jerked her to her feet.

"Go on, now — straight to bed! You can do without your bath tonight."

"Won't you even come and say good night?" Doreen asked piteously.

Unwillingly, Mrs. Rawlings softened. The tension of her own nerves had been relieved a little by her anger.

"We'll see about that. But no one's coming near you yet awhile."

She picked up her darning again and kept her head turned away as Doreen left the room. She heard her slow, dragging ascent of the stairs and then the click of her bedroom door. Suddenly her own eyes filled with tears. It was a poor sort of ending to the day.

Francie and Geoffrey, returning together, found her still mending. It had been arranged that Doreen should sit up later that evening, as a final treat, and they were surprised not to be greeted by her.

"Where's Doreen?" Francie asked at once.

"I've sent her to bed," Mrs. Rawlings said stolidly. She did not look up from her work.

"Oh, but I thought . . ."

"She was a naughty girl." Her voice was final and forbade questions.

There was a moment's uncomfortabe silence. Then Geoffrey said a shade too heartily:

"Over-excited, I expect. I remember I was always in disgrace by the end of Christmas Day." He glanced at Francie, seeking support, but it was obvious that she was too surprised and distressed to supply it. "What about supper?" he asked as a diversion.

"Not for me, thank you, sir. I've had plenty."

"Well, I think I'll just cut myself a cheese sandwich and have a glass of beer. Francie?"

"No, thank you." But she changed her mind immediately. "Perhaps I will, though. I'll go and help myself."

Mrs. Rawlings rolled up her work.

"I'll be getting along to bed. Good-night, m'am. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Mrs. Rawlings."

In the kitchen they looked at each other, Geoffrey with rather whimsical interrogation, Francie unsmiling and bewildered.

"What do you suppose went wrong?" he asked.

"I can't imagine. It seems such a shame, when she'd enjoyed the day so much. *I've* never had to send her to bed."

"Children always play up their mothers. It's an established fact."

"Yes." But she did not sound convinced. "I should have thought that Mrs. Rawlings was too strict for that. It's . . . unfortunate, isn't it? Just as I thought that everything had gone so well."

"Well, it can't be anything to do with us."

"No. Doreen was happy enough when we left."

"Then don't worry any more. It's their own private battle and they must fight it out between themselves. What about that sandwich?"

"I don't really want one. I just didn't want to be left alone with Mrs. Rawlings."

"Still scared of her?" he mocked.

She nodded, not returning his smile.

"A bit."

Doreen was awake when her mother came into her room. She had cried till she was exhausted and now she felt only a vast, passive melancholy. She blinked at the light with swollen eyelids.

"Mum?" she whispered.

"Yes, it's me." She sat down on the chair beside her. "Are you a good girl now?"

"Yes." Tears welled into her eyes again.

"You're sorry you were rude?"

"Oh yes, Mum."

"Then we'll say no more about it." She bent down to kiss her and Doreen clung to her fiercely. "You're Mum's girl, aren't you?" she asked tenderly, and felt the child's grasp tighten more, in affirmation. "Mum's girl," she repeated gently, like a lullaby. "Mum's own girl . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. RAWLINGS returned to London on the afternoon of Boxing Day. A rather subdued Doreen scarcely left her side until the train drew out. Saying good-bye to the Osbornes, she made a little speech, thanking them both for the hospitality she had received and for their care of Doreen. She expressed herself well and with a certain dignity. On the surface everything appeared so satisfactory that Francie wondered why she felt depressed.

There was a change in Doreen from Christmas Day onwards; she became far more affectionate with Francie. She did not herself know why this should be, but in some curious way it was as if she felt a need to demonstrate in opposition to her mother's criticism, spoken and unspoken. Francie was so obviously innocent of any knowledge of offence. There was a tinge of remorse in Doreen's hurried, shy caresses which neither of them recognised or understood. She sought Francie's company on all occasions.

One afternoon early in January, Francie collected shoes to be mended and a saucepan that needed soldering and invited Doreen to walk to the village with her. Doreen had been playing in the garden shed. With certain reservations — she must not handle shears or scythe or move the roller or the lawn-mower — the shed was hers. She kept her tent there, but at the moment this could rarely be erected, the weather was too cold. Francie had suggested at lunch that she might pretend today that it was Ali Baba's cave, and for a short while Doreen had obediently imagined that the various sacks and boxes held precious stones and bars of

gold. There was even a barrel in which Ali Baba could conceal himself. But presently a flight of bombers passed overhead and it occurred to her that it would be more fun to play that she was in an air-raid shelter. She crouched on the floor warily watching the sky.

"That was a near one," she murmured. "Fair shakes you up, don't it? Are you asleep, Mrs. Rawlings? I'm going to have a cup of tea. It didn't half give me a turn."

Her mother and Francie would have been equally surprised and pained to hear her. Mrs. Rawlings believed that she had scarcely noticed the raids; Francie hoped that she had almost forgotten them.

A solitary Hurricane made a feint of dive-bombing the house and Doreen flattened out in simulated terror.

"Oh Gawd! I thought that one had my number on it. What a night! Seems as if it wouldn't never end. Mr. Thompson says there's ever such a big fire over the river. I've got a horror of fire. I'd rather have any thing but fire. . . . Put a sock in it, Ma — you'll give us all the creeps. Come on — cheer up! Listen to them guns — don't that put a bit of heart in you? Bang, bang, bang! Crash! That's the way, boys — hit the buggers! . . . Don't make such a row, Joe — you'll wake the kids . . . . Wake the kids — I like that! They're lucky if they can sleep through this . . ."

Francie paused, astonished, at the sound of Doreen's voice apparently reciting a dramatic monologue. She looked round the interior of the shed and was even more astonished to discover her lying full length on a pile of sacks, half hidden by the open door.

"Doreen! What on earth are you doing?"

Doreen jumped up, looking self-conscious.

"I was only playing, Mrs. Osborne."

"Playing at what?"

"At air-raids. Pretending there was an air-raid and this was the shelter."

"Do you often play that game?" Francie asked, disconcerted.

"At home sometimes. When I'm by myself with nobody to play with."

"Well, you needn't be by yourself any longer now. I'm going to the village and I thought you'd like to come with me."

"Oh yes, please! Shall I get my hat?"

"Hat and scarf and gloves. I'll wait for you down the drive."

Francie retailed this incident to Mrs. Renshawe when they called at the Vicarage later in the afternoon. Doreen had been told she might go and see the evacuated babies and had gone off full of pleasure.

"Isn't it appalling that a child can play at air-raids? I hoped that she'd almost forgotten about them. What ought I to do about it, do you think? If I show I disapproved, I'm afraid she'll just bottle it up and then I'll have done more harm than good."

"I shouldn't let her be alone too much. She'll be starting school soon, won't she? Most of the children here don't know what air-raids are, except in theory. She seems an adaptable little thing—she'll soon fall in with their games and ideas. Unless you think she's the type that likes to show off and impress the others?"

"Oh no, not in the least. She hasn't a scrap of exhibitionism in her."

"I don't know anything about exhibitionism," Mrs. Renshawe said dryly, "but I know a lot about showing off. I agree with you — she isn't the type. Be careful you don't spoil her."

"I'll try not to," Francie promised humbly. "Making her happy isn't spoiling her, is it?"

Mrs. Renshawe smiled.

"Ah, Frances, don't you know the answer to that yourself? You must try to learn more self-assurance. There are plenty of things in the world you must make up your own mind about, without coming to me or that clever young man you married."

Francie shook her head.

"I'll never learn self-assurance. I'm a fool and I know it. I knew it in the nursery."

"More disgrace to the nursery that taught you so. Never mind, my dear, you have charm, and that's the gift that takes you furthest in the end. People don't get loved for their brains."

"Don't you think so? And yet I'm sure I fell in love with Geoffrey for his brains."

"Nonsense. You fell in love with Geoffrey for his asthma."

"What *do* you mean?" Francie laughed.

"You wanted someone you could mother and that gave you the excuse. It's been a lucky thing for you both that Geoffrey isn't the kind to care for mothering. I'll give him credit for that — it wasn't the reason he fell in love with you."

"What extraordinary things you sometimes say!" Francie murmured, looking almost alarmed. "When did you work all that out — about Geoffrey and me?"

"A long time ago," Mrs. Renshawe said primly. "A long time ago. And now I think you'd better collect that child and I'll give you both some tea."

After this conversation, Francie felt relieved when the holidays ended and it was time for Doreen to start school. As for Doreen herself, she did not find this as alarming as she had feared. Through

the Warmans, she already knew a number of the village children, and although she had lost some ground in the past term and had to begin in a class below her normal age group, she soon caught up with the work. Like most of the evacuees, she was quicker-witted than the local children. But it was among the latter that she chiefly sought her friends. It was as if she preferred to keep quite separate her two lives.

It amused Geoffrey to help Doreen with her lessons. He had a natural flair for teaching which he had never discovered before. Also, it pleased his vanity that she should make better progress than the rest. He found, to his own self-mockery, that he had to check a tendency to boast about her at the office. He had little sympathy with other people's complaints about evacuees, taking to himself and Francie credit which was largely Mrs. Rawlings's. Children were perfectly good and amenable if you knew how to manage them. This kid we've got, for instance . . .

In part, this more personal interest in Doreen had another cause. During January he suffered a particularly bad attack of asthma and was persuaded into giving up much of the heavy work in the garden. A man from the village dug the ground for the spring sowing, and Geoffrey found himself moodily at a loss. He developed a habit of taking Doreen for walks, instructing her in country lore. He talked of buying her a bicycle, but Francie was against the idea. She had an instinctive conviction that Mrs. Rawlings wouldn't like it.

"But why?" Geoffrey demanded. "I'd teach her to ride — she'd be quite safe."

"It isn't that. It's . . . oh, I don't know — I ver can express myself properly. She'd think we re . . . bribing Doreen."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Well, taking an unfair advantage, anyhow. Giving her something her mother couldn't afford to give her, but would love to give her if she could. You must know what I mean."

"I suppose I do," he concurred gloomily. "But it seems bad luck on the child."

In other respects, it was he who restrained Francie. She was nervous about Doreen's health to the point of neurosis. Every cold was incipient pneumonia, every stomach-ache, appendicitis. If she were like this about another woman's child, Geoffrey privately thought, how would she have been with a child of her own? Fortunately, Doreen's health was good, though she had little colour and remained thin.

She had adapted herself so readily to her new background that the Osbornes believed that she already took for granted the change in her environment. As she never commented, they supposed that she did not observe. In fact, she remained acutely conscious of the difference. Left to her own devices, she liked to walk from room to room, mounting first the flight of stairs to the floor which contained her own bedroom and then the further flight which nowadays was very little used and which led to what had been the servants' bedrooms and a lumber-room. She was fascinated by the thought of such a large house to contain three persons. At home, there had been fewer rooms than people. It did not occur to her to wonder whether this were right or wrong; she thought only that it was nice to have so many rooms to walk about in and that when she was grown up she would buy Mum a house as big as this one. Then Mr. and Mrs. Osborne would come to visit them and say how beautiful it was.

But better than the freedom to roam over three

floors was the privacy and seclusion of her own bedroom. The charm of possession never wore off. One of the reasons that she loved Francie was that she always knocked on the door and waited to be told to come in. Not only did this raise her to the status of a grown-up, it also set the seal on her ownership. She often hoped that somebody would seek her there, for the joy of bidding them enter.

One rainy afternoon she had accompanied Francie to the lumber-room in search of something and had found it full of odds and ends of discarded furniture—a wicker arm-chair that creaked, a writing-table with a wobble, rusted fire-tongs, an ornate umbrella-stand, a curious, old-fashioned knife-machine. . . . Francie said helplessly that she supposed it ought most of it to go for salvage, if only someone would collect the stuff, but Doreen had begged to have the chair and table. The latter had a drawer where she could keep her school-books, she had pointed out. Francie had added a cushion for the chair and now her room had acquired the rather cluttered appearance with which she had been familiar at home and which she still instinctively preferred to the Osbornes' more austere ideas of interior decoration. The act of choosing her own articles of furniture seemed to make them peculiarly hers. Henceforth, subconsciously, she felt more residential, less a visitor.

Some way after her pleasure in the house came her pleasure in the garden. She had known it so far only in the winter months and she found it hard to imagine it with any flowers other than the rather uninteresting chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies which Francie tended ineffectually. Dead leaves choked the little stream and the goldfish in the pond remained hidden. It would all be different in the spring, they told her, and different in the

woods too — though she liked to race Mac down the paths springy with beech-mast, underneath the bare branches of the trees. In spring, Francie said she could search for violets in the hedge and bring back bunches of primroses to post to her mother in a cardboard box lined with damp cotton-wool. In spring, Geoffrey said, she could help him sow the vegetables and later plant them out in neat rows. She could be very useful, he told her, and save his old bones. His bones *weren't* old, she countered with indignation. Unwittingly, her protest was against the shadow of mortality his words implied. Those whom she loved must live for ever.

Since she no longer felt herself a stranger, it was some while before she realised that her position in the Osbornes' household singled her out in the village and divided her from her school-mates by an intangible barrier. The young Warmans took it for granted; she lived where Lucy worked; but among the other children she remained slightly alien — less because she was a Londoner than because she came from the house up the hill, which, set back from the road and hidden from them by its curving drive, had a quality of aloofness, even secrecy. At one time or another, they had all ventured through the gate to have a look at it, and many of them had paid quite legitimate visits, bringing messages and parcels. But Doreen lived there. She swung on the gate by right, went in and out by the front door, slept behind one of the upstairs windows. They did not particularly envy her these privileges, but nevertheless her enjoyment of them somehow set her apart. She could never be entirely on an equal footing with the rest.

The situation was brought home to her one Saturday afternoon when, playing in the garden, she heard voices that she recognised coming from

the road beyond the hedge and, running out, perceived a group of little girls, the Warmans among them, ascending the hill. She called out to them and they stopped, crowding round the gate, friendly enough, pushing and giggling, pleased with themselves and the occasion.

"We're going to the Sale of Work at Little Ditcham," Betty Warman volunteered.

"What's a Sale of Work?" Doreen enquired.

"You know — where you buy things," Betty explained vaguely. "My mother says it's a lot of old rubbish, but anyhow we're going. There's a Lucky Dip. It's threepence to go in and sixpence for the Dip. We've each got half a crown, so we can buy something too, if we want to."

"Can I come with you, if I ask Mrs. Osborne?"

Involuntarily Betty looked at two older girls, the leaders of the party, and apparently satisfied that they had no objection, answered for them all:

"Yes, you can come if you like."

"Wait for me, then," Doreen implored. "I won't be a minute." She raced up the drive.

Francie seemed woefully slow in taking in what was required of her and, when she had finally grasped Doreen's rather confused explanations, decidedly dubious about granting permission.

"There's a whole lot of them going," Doreen pleaded. "Betty and Anne, and Grace Higgins and the twins and Mrs. Hennessy's Rose . . . "

"I'll come out and see them," Francie cut her short.

Her appearance at the gate hushed the chatter immediately. They all assumed the protectively dumb politeness of country-bred children towards the local gentry. Quite unconsciously, Francie responded to it with the faintly patronising kindness

which it automatically evoked. She talked to them as they expected her to talk.

The Sale of Work was in aid of the Red Cross, she elicited, and was to be held in the village hall. In the evening it would be followed by a dance, but none of the children were staying for that. You could get tea there, if you paid sixpence. If Doreen went with them, they'd see she came back with them too. And yes, Mrs. Osborne, they wouldn't be later than six o'clock. Armed, like the Warmans, with half a crown, Doreen was finally allowed to set off.

Less good-natured children might have jeered at Francie's strictures and precautions, but it occurred to none of them to do so. Nevertheless, it had been brought home to them afresh that Doreen was different. Their own mothers knew all about the Sale of Work and most of them would be along presently to join them there. They had no scruples about letting their children, safely grouped together, walk along the high-road to the next village. Only Doreen, who shared their work and play at school, spoke the same language, wore the same clothes, must obtain special permission and be particularly safeguarded. They knew nothing of Francie's enhanced sense of responsibility for another woman's child. This, they supposed, was just the gentry fussing. And since Doreen was far too loyal to dissociate herself, it seemed as though she, also, put an exaggerated value on her person.

Doreen was perfectly aware of all this. She felt embarrassed at being a cause of bother and ashamed of being made to seem "different". Like most normal children, she passionately desired to conform to the average. Because she was happy there, everything about the village appeared to her right and admirable. She asked nothing better than

to submit to the unwritten rules of village conduct and tradition. But everything about Mrs. Osborne was right and admirable too. Vaguely puzzled and disheartened, she found her habitual refuge in silence. The colour had gone from the afternoon's outing.

She cheered up and forgot about it temporarily when they reached Little Ditcham and paid their threepences to go into the hall. This was something new in her experience and she was impressed by the stalls and the bunting and the stacks of cakes and sandwiches spread out ready on the trestle tables of the tea buffet. Like the other children, she went first to the Lucky Dip. For sixpence she drew out a little imitation leather purse, which was, apparently, good value and matter for congratulation. Another sixpence went fruitlessly on a raffle ticket for a doll's bed (but it would have been too small for Hermie anyhow) and another bought a cup of tea and two cakes. This left only ninepence to spend at the stalls. She bought a cake of soap for sevenpence and put the last two pennies in a Red Cross collecting-box.

Some of the children remained behind with older relations whom they had joined there, but Betty and Anne Warman, Rose Hennessy and an older girl named Joan Pickering walked back with her. The white road, hedged on either side, seemed eerie in the dusk. Doreen, who was used to blacked-out London streets illuminated only by searchlights seeking enemy aircraft, started with terror at the sudden movement of an unseen cow and looked apprehensively at the shadowy grass verges. She was ashamed of her fears and it did not occur to her that her companions might be alarmed by the dark doorways of tenement houses and the drone of German bombers overhead. She walked between

Betty Warman and Joan Pickering, and she would have liked to take their hands.

Joan, who had come provided with a quite large sum of money, had bought a tea-cosy for her mother and several other articles of use and ornament. She was rather complacently pleased with herself and inclined to patronise the younger children who had squandered their money on disappointing odds and ends, the nature and purpose of which now seemed to them uncertain. By comparison, Doreen's little purse and cake of soap ranked high.

"Though I think you're a silly to buy your own soap," she pointed out.

"It's for a present," Doreen explained hastily. "I'm going to send the purse to Mum and give the soap to Mrs. Osborne."

"You're never going to give that soap to Mrs. Osborne!" Joan exclaimed, tittering.

"Why not? It smells lovely."

"It'll look as if you thought she didn't wash, that's all!"

Rather sycophantically, the younger children joined in her amusement. "D'reen thinks Mrs. Osborne doesn't wash," they chanted in chorus. But Doreen was unperturbed. Little girls being silly were much the same in London as in the country she knew all about them.

"Well, I could give the soap to Mum and the purse to Mrs. Osborne," she went on tranquilly, "but I think they'd like them better my way round."

Rose Hennessy, a normally well-behaved child, repented of her teasing and tried to change the subject.

"You've got like two mothers, haven't you, Doreen?" she suggested sympathetically.

"I've only got one real Mum," Doreen answered

guardedly. "Mrs. Osborne's only looking after me while the raids are on."

"Yes, I know. But she's kind of like a mother, isn't she? I mean, she acts like a mother. She's ever so particular about you."

The shadow that had fallen earlier came back. Despite Rose's good intentions, she had voiced their general criticism. It stabbed Doreen with an almost physical pain, for she knew that it was less for her than for Francie.

"My Mum likes her to be particular," was all she could think to say.

"Oh, I'm sure you're very precious," Joan sneered, suddenly malicious.

The Warmans and Rose exchanged glances, uncertain how to respond. They did not know what had happened to the conversation. Nobody had meant . . . They glanced at Doreen too. But she was silent and her face showed nothing.

"Look, there's a mole!" Anne shouted, only half conscious of relief at the diversion.

"Where?" "Let me see!" "Oh it's *dead.*" They stooped over the small dark corpse lying in the middle of the road, enjoying the exaggeration of their shudders.

"If you got enough and skinned 'em, you could make a pair of gloves," Anne suggested.

"Ugh! Don't touch it — it's all squashed."

"Run over — that's what."

It had grown almost too dark to see and they walked on more quickly, to make up for their delay. A labourer on a bicycle overtook them and called out a greeting and two young women, also on bicycles, passed them going to the Sale. Among these incidents, the discussion arising out of Doreen's fairings seemed to have been forgotten. They parted from her at the gate in cheerful, raised voices.

"See you Monday!" they shouted. "Don't forget that book you promised to lend me . . ."

Francie, listening for their return, smiled. They sounded as though they had enjoyed themselves. She was glad she had let Doreen go.

Doreen came rather slowly into the drawing-room, blinking at the light. She held out the cake of soap without saying anything.

"Did you buy it at the sale?" Francie asked. She sniffed it. "Lilac — heavenly!"

"It's for you."

"For me? Darling, I didn't mean you to spend your money on me. But it's lovely — thank you very much. It's my favourite scent."

"Is it really?" Doreen brightened.

"Honestly. That's why I always use lilac-scented powder."

"That was lucky, wasn't it? Because I didn't know. Look—I'm going to send this purse to Mum. I got it in the Dip."

"You *have* done well. Did you get a nice tea?"

"Two cakes and one of them was chocolate. But they weren't as good as Lucy makes. And I bought a raffle ticket, but it didn't win."

"I never win anything in raffles, either. You enjoyed yourself, anyhow?"

"Yes, thank you."

Not for any inducement would she have told her otherwise. Besides, it wasn't really a lie — she had enjoyed herself most of the time.

"Where's Mr. Osborne?"

"He's working in his study. But he wants you to say good-night to him before you go to bed."

Lucy was in the kitchen, preparing to leave. She was going to the dance that evening and excitement had made her more inane than usual. She asked Doreen questions about the Sale of Work, but

did not listen to the answers, and a moment later asked the same questions again. Doreen was used to this by now and did not worry. She ate her supper quickly, pleased that Geoffrey had sent a message to her and looking forward to visiting him in his study, which was ordinarily out of bounds.

Geoffrey was sitting at his big desk with the green-shaded reading-lamp on it, correcting a document in legal foolscap. Doreen hesitated in the doorway, waiting to be invited further; she had recently learned that you only knocked on bedroom doors, but it still seemed rather rude to enter unannounced.

"Come on," Geoffrey called out. "I don't bite on Saturdays."

Doreen giggled. She thought that Mr. Osborne was a very funny man. Moving nearer to the desk, she eyed with interest its assortment of pens and paper-clips and rubber bands.

"What's that?" She pointed to a long stick of hard, shiny, red substance.

"Sealing-wax."

"What's sealing-wax?"

"I'll show you."

He struck a match and let a blob of wax fall on the back of an envelope, impressing it with his signet ring. Doreen exclaimed in wonder.

"Like to make one yourself?"

"Oh yes, please!"

"Be careful, then — it burns like fun."

She experimented rather clumsily, carefully licking the ring each time, covering the envelope with sprawling imprints. A spot of hot wax fell on her hand and she jumped.

"I told you it burned. Don't ever play around with this when I'm not here."

"Oh no, I won't," she promised earnestly.

"That's enough now. I can't spare any more

matches." He threw the envelope into the waste-paper-basket and leant back in his chair. "I'm going into Oxford next Saturday. Like to come with me?"

She nodded vehemently, her eyes shining.

"Is Mrs. Osborne going too?"

"If she wants to."

"In the train?"

"Yes, in the train."

"Shall we have lunch in a shop?"

"We shall have lunch in a hotel, if we can find a vacant table."

"I've never been in a hotel."

"Well, that will be a new experience for you. I'll show you my college, if there's time."

"It'll be fun," Doreen breathed.

"Yes, I think it will. Now scram — I've got a lot more work to do before dinner."

He turned away and was surprised and rather pleased to feel Doreen's lips warm against his cheek-bone.

"Good-night, Mr. Osborne."

"Good-night, Doreen."

Outside the door she paused a moment in the passage, smiling to herself. Joan Pickering no longer seemed important.

CHAPTER IX

The plan to go to Oxford seemed as though it might not materialise when a letter arrived from Helen inviting herself for the week-end. But since she did not want to travel Friday evening, it was arranged that she should break her journey at Oxford on Saturday and join them there. Geoffrey left early and alone, to conduct his business before lunch, but

Francie and Doreen timed themselves to meet Helen's train, which was due about noon.

When the train drew in, it was Doreen who saw Helen first. She recognised her with surprise, for she had not been able beforehand to remember what she looked like. The journey they had taken together, five months before, seemed very faraway —a tune played in a different key, transposed and translated. She was not even sure now if she had liked Miss Osborne. Seeing her again, recognising her, she was still not quite sure. She associated her with the first unhappiness of her separation from her mother, with awkwardness and bashfulness and fear. Things were different now, she was different herself, but Miss Osborne would not know that. She felt her new-found self-assurance to be questioned and immediately it shrank, leaving her constrained and no longer completely at ease. Instinctively, with an unconscious challenge, she took Francie's hand.

"There's Miss Osborne, over there," she said.

They moved forward to greet her and Helen kissed Francie and, after a moment's hesitation, kissed Doreen.

"That's from your mother," she said. "I saw her yesterday and she sent you her love."

They both looked down at her smilingly, expecting her to reply, but Doreen could not speak. She felt a sudden desolate ache of longing for her mother — as though, too late, she had learned that she had travelled on the train with Helen, but had not alighted. Yesterday was such a short while ago.

"We're meeting Geoffrey at the Randolph, Helen," Francie said tactfully. "You'll book your bag, of course."

They walked from the station, Doreen still holding Francie's hand. Now that she had actually arrived in Oxford, with the pleasures in store for her

there drawing nearer with every step she took, her spirits revived. The streets seemed very ordinary and secretly she was a little disappointed in them, but she remained alert and watchful. She was looking for Amber. She would have no difficulty in recognising Amber, brief though their acquaintance had been. And it would be somehow satisfactory, she thought, if Amber were to see her going in to lunch at a hotel.

They arrived at the Randolph, however, without this pleasing coincidence having occurred. Geoffrey was waiting for them in the lounge.

"I booked a table for half-past," he greeted them. "We can have some drinks to fill in time. Do you suppose they'll make a fuss about Doreen?" He grinned at her wi.h derisive affection. "Sit in the corner and look eighteen. I'll order some ginger-beer for you."

In her skimpy coat and round felt hat, Doreen did not look eighteen, but she looked, and even felt, remarkably composed. She had faith in Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. Each time that they had promised her enjoyment, their promise had been fulfilled. They did not place her in situations leading to embarrassment and downfall, they did not leave her floundering in waters where she could not touch the ground. Mrs. Osborne had warned her beforehand about the waiters and at lunch the day before they had even had a rehearsal with the knives and forks, and Lucy had handed the plates and they had all three laughed a lot. If something unexpected happened, she knew that she had only to look at Mrs. Osborne to find her attention immediately ready, to be given immediate aid. She was tense and rather pale, but only with excitement and anticipation.

Their table in the luncheon-room was near the

window, commanding a view of the Martyrs' Memorial, and Geoffrey chose to enliven the meal with a gruesome account of the burnings.

"They used to put gunpowder round their necks, to hasten the proceedings," he said cheerfully, "and Latimer was lucky — his exploded almost at once. But Ridley, poor devil, had his legs burnt off before the flames reached the powder. People lost their heads and made it worse for him by piling on more faggots. They had pretty ways in the sixteenth century; even in this one we haven't been able to improve upon them much."

"Don't be disgusting, Geoffrey," Helen said reprovingly. "You're spoiling my lunch and Doreen will have nightmares — won't you Doreen?"

She smiled at her, and Doreen felt sufficiently elated at having coped successfully with all three courses to smile back and shake her head in denial.

"Doreen has far too much sense to worry herself about a bishop who died four hundred years ago," Geoffrey argued. "I've brought her here to-day to improve her history and you can't come to Oxford and ignore the martyrs. When we've had coffee, we're going to tour the town and I shall impart further information of a dramatic and interesting kind."

"*I'm* not going to tour the town and listen to you showing off," Helen said firmly.

Doreen giggled. It amused her to hear Geoffrey accused of showing off, because it was so obviously absurd. If she had believed there was a grain of truth in the charge, she would have been very indignant.

"I thought you and I might look at the shops, Helen," Francie suggested, "if you wouldn't be bored? I have to do most of my shopping here nowadays. In fact, I want to see if I can buy a suit

and you could help me choose it. I hate buying clothes by myself—I never know what I like and I usually end by taking something that the saleswoman wants to get rid of."

"This time you shall buy what *I* like," Helen pronounced, "and it will be very satisfactory."

"We'll meet again for tea then, Geoffrey," Francie said. "Don't overtire Doreen, will you?"

"I won't be tired, Mrs. Osborne," Doreen assured her eagerly. "I promise I won't. I can walk five miles, easily. Can't I, Mr. Osborne?"

"Easily," he confirmed gravely.

"You will show me your college, won't you? That's what I want to see most."

"I'll show you the outside. We shan't be able to go in, because it has been commandeered."

"What does that mean?"

"Taken over by the government. Because of the war."

"Why couldn't they take one that wasn't yours?" Doreen asked indignantly.

"It was a mistake. They didn't find out until it was too late. Then they wrote me a letter of abject apology and I felt morally bound to tell them it was all right—they could stay there."

"You didn't! You're teasing," Doreen chided him.

"What makes you think that?"

"I always know when you're teasing." She appealed to Francie. "He's making it up, isn't he Mrs. Osborne?"

"I'm afraid he is," she smiled.

"There! I knew you were, all the time." She tried to look reproving and laughed instead. "Can we go now, please?"

"Amn't I allowed any coffee? Oh, all right—come along! You'll settle the bill, will you, Francie?"

Watching them walk away together, Geoffrey talking earnestly, Doreen's head upturned towards him with devout attention, Helen said:

"They're good friends, those two, aren't they?"

"Very." Francie's voice was warm. "It's been good for Geoffrey, having her. He takes her all over the place. He'd never go out so much by himself or with me."

"She's altered a lot since I brought her down. I suppose you know that."

"Well, she's not shy any longer — not shy of us, anyhow. Is that what you mean?"

"Not altogether. It's something more radical than that." Helen paused, seeking her words, and then gave up the attempt to be subtle. "You're turning her into a child of your own class."

"Oh — class," Francie said vaguely and rather contemptuously. "I don't think of children as belonging to any particular class. There are nice children and not so nice children, and some with good manners and some with bad, but they seem to me much more alike than grownups, as well as being much pleasanter. Doreen had very nice manners to begin with, but I dare say her accent has improved. I do correct it sometimes, and her grammar."

"Why?" Helen asked bluntly.

"Why?" Francie echoed with astonishment. "Because . . . well, it's obvious, isn't it? A bad accent is such a handicap in life. Geoffrey always says that. He says it's the basis of class distinctions in this country and if we all spoke alike they would die out in a generation or two."

"But even if that were true," Helen argued patiently, "and I don't think it is, with all due deference to Geoffrey (he doesn't always take that one, incidentally; it's probably according to his mood at the moment), you talk as though you

imagined that Doreen were going to spend the rest of her life in your particular little world. But she isn't. She's a visitor here. She'll go back to a world where most of the things you've taught her will be drawbacks rather than advantages."

"Oh no, Helen!" Francie half rebuked, half pleaded. "It must be an advantage to have learned more than you knew before, surely. We're not giving her expensive tastes or spoiling her. Today is a special treat. Lots of the children in the village have more pocket-money than her mother sends her and we don't give her extra, purposely. I'd love to buy her nice clothes, but I never do — I'm afraid of hurting Mrs. Rawlings's feelings. I did try to knit her a jersey, because I thought that wouldn't matter, but it turned out all the wrong shape and I gave it to Lucy in the end, to unpick for the wool."

Helen chuckled.

"How characteristic, darling! But I refuse to be disarmed. I'm serious about this, Francie. You aren't haunted every morning by the brooding presense of Mrs. Rawlings, as I am. She hangs about the office to see me, in the unconfessed hope that I'll have news of Doreen for her. She's not my favourite woman, but when I watched Doreen today I felt sorry for her. You're giving her a lot to live up to."

Francie was silent, confused and depressed. She wished that Geoffrey were there to support her, although she knew that he would override rather than dissolve her scruples. Deep down, she recognised that in this matter of Doreen, he was far less conscientious than she was. He had developed a genuine affection for the child and he was charming to her; she adored him; but he regarded her as rather like a novel and delightful toy. He was proud of her unfolding, he enjoyed showing her off, his interest was strong enough and enduring enough

to outweigh the minor inconveniences that the care of any child entailed; but Doreen was not an individual to him as she was to Francie. If her mother were to claim her now he would be sincerely regretful: "I positively miss that child, you know," he would say, surprised at himself. But once outside his orbit she would cease to have importance for him. He would not greatly concern himself with what became of her or exert himself to keep in touch. Doreen had no life for him beyond the point at which it met his own. Nothing that Helen said would worry him or alter his opinions and behaviour.

Perhaps, then, Helen was wrong, Francie thought — veering as always between two points of view. Helen prided herself that her head ruled her heart and people of that persuation were always scornful of what they termed sentimentality. She knew that Helen thought her woefully, culpably sentimental. But there might be situations in which the heart was wiser than the cool, discriminating brain. Surely, surely it was better for a child to be loved mistakenly than not at all? Francie, who had only had the latter portion, believed this desperately. Wasn't everyone's life, after all, a series of adjustments? School, work, marriage — they robbed as they gave. Doreen had been unhappy when she first came to them and perhaps she would be unhappy when she went away, but that was no reason, surely to withhold happiness from her now? If the positions had been reversed, if it had been her child who had had to be evacuated to the care of Mrs. Rawlings, wouldn't she have chosen that she should be loved and made much of, even at the cost of acquiring an alien accent and different table manners? It seemed to her at the moment an unanswerable argument. She hugged it to herself, unwilling to give Helen the opportunity to murder it.

"I didn't mean to silence you completely," Helen said. "Don't look so solemn, darling. I seem to have cast myself for the role of Cassandra today, and she was deservedly unpopular, I always thought."

Francie sighed and smiled.

"I don't see how we could have done any differently, honestly. Perhaps before the war, when we had maids sleeping in, we might have left them to look after her, though even then . . . It isn't as if she'd been billeted on us compulsorily. We offered to have her."

"You mean, I asked you if you'd have her," Helen said ruefully. "I shall probably turn out to be the villain of this piece, in the end. That'll be poetic justice, if you like."

"I don't see why this piece should have a villain," Francie countered. "They don't all, you know."

Geoffrey and Doreen were having a very different kind of conversation; or rather, Geoffrey was holding forth and Doreen was listening. The Civil Wars, the rudiments of Gothic architecture and reminiscences of his own undergraduate days mingled in a hotch-potch which bewildered but enchanted her. What a funny little piece of blotting-paper she was, he thought with amused affection — everything soaked in, though the outlines were perhaps rather blurred. He appreciated the fact that she never seemed bored. Mrs. Rawlings's ideas of bringing up children were obviously rather spartan, either from conviction or economy. A pantomime at Christmas and a very occasional visit to the cinema appeared to be the limit of ready-made entertainment she permitted. Geoffrey approved, believing that there was enough interest for a child in discovering the actual world without anticipating the poverty-stricken years of reliance on professional illusionists. Plenty of time for that when life had

grown grey with custom, stale with disappointment. At the moment it was sufficient joy to choose picture postcards of the buildings she had looked at, with the chief prize a coloured one which showed the coats of arms of all the colleges. What was a coat of arms, she wanted to know? Geoffrey was delighted to inform her, leaving her with a confused impression of knights and tiltingyards and ladies' favours. She thought that the tournaments had taken place in Christchurch Meadow and that the shields over college doorways had been hung there by the knights, but Geoffrey did not suspect this.

"We'll come again in the summer," he promised, "and I'll take you on the river, in a punt."

"And will you fall in again, like that time you told about?"

"Not if I can help it. Won't you be satisfied unless I do?"

"I wouldn't want you to *drown,*" she stipulated hastily.

"That's very decent of you. You'd just like me to get wet and look silly? Supposing I upset the punt and you fell in too?"

"But I can't swim," Her tone was rather anxious.

"I'd better teach you, then. Would you like to learn to swim?"

"Not very much," Doreen said cautiously. "Once teacher took us in the baths at home, but I didn't like it. The water went up my nose."

"That will teach you to keep your nose shut next time."

"But you can't shut your *nose,*" she expostulated.

"Did I say nose? I meant ears, of course."

"Oh, Mr. Osborne, you are funny!"

She laughed, as he had meant her to, because it amused and flattered him to reduce her to giggling weakness, to see her usually solemn and intent ex-

pression break up into delighted animation. She did not laugh like that with anybody else, and he would have been unwittingly affronted if she had.

"I think it's time we joined the others now," he said. "I want my tea."

"Are we going to have tea in the hotel?"

"No, tea in a shop. They're going to meet us there."

"When I'm grown up," she promised, "I'm going to take you and Mrs. Osborne to lunch in a hotel. And Miss Osborne," she added as an afterthought. "And Mum, of course. It'll be after the war then, and you can have ice-cream and bananas. Would you like that?"

"It's a date."

He thought that Francie seemed rather subdued when they joined her, in spite of the fact that she had bought herself exactly the suit she wanted, with Helen's connivance. But it was not until they were home again, with Doreen asleep long since and Helen retired early to bed, that he discovered why. She put a fresh log on the fire and lay back in her chair, her hands clasped behind her head, staring at the encouraged flames.

"Helen has been lecturing me," she said. "You too. She thinks we're both to blame."

"Helen can be very interfering," he said placidly. "What now?"

"She thinks we're being unfair to Mrs. Rawlings, and to Doreen. She thinks we treat her too much like our own child — our own kin, anyway. She said that Doreen was only a visitor in our world and that when she went back to her mother, the things she had learned with us would only be drawbacks to her."

"Rubbish. How does she expect us to treat her?"

"I don't really know. But I do see what she means, Geoffrey, although I hadn't thought of it before."

"Darling, you always see what everybody means, but that doesn't mean that everybody is right."

"I suppose not. But I'm afraid it's true that Doreen will miss the life she has with us, when she goes home. Of course I know that she's devoted to her mother, but I expect it's more fun here."

"At that rate, we ought all to go through life refusing every dob of jam that came our way, because our bread was going to seem so dry when the jam ran out. That's a poor philosophy, even for a child of nine. I think myself that it's a pity the world is so arranged that one person's commonplace is another's luxury, but that's surely no reason for not evening up the position as often as possible? A nice sort of couple we should be if we withheld what we had from Doreen because it might make her discontented with her customary lot!"

Francie unclasped her hands and leant forward eagerly. She looked quite happy again.

"I wish I'd thought of that. It's true, of course. If Helen brings the subject up again, I'll make her talk to you. You put things so much better than I do."

"I'll talk to Helen," he said gently. But the gentleness was for her. "I'm going to bed now. Are you coming?"

"In a little while."

She stayed by the fire until the log had burnt out, but she no longer looked particularly happy. Helen had reminded her of something which she tried not to think about as a rule. One day Doreen would go back. This house which bounded her existence would be once more a house without a child. And that would be hard to bear.

CHAPTER X

A SOLDIER was walking up the hill from the village. He walked slowly, aimlessly slashing at the grass verge with a stick cut from the hedge. He carried no kit and he was bare-headed, his forage cap tucked through his shoulder-strap. He was pale for a soldier, clerkly in appearance, with receding fair hair and mild blue eyes. To give himself courage, he had drunk two pints of beer.

Outside the gate of the house on the crest of the hill he paused, looking up and down the road, not as though in fear of being observed, but rather as though hoping for some measure of assistance or perhaps for a diversion, to delay him. But the road was empty and he pushed open the gate and walked up the drive, glancing sideways at the garden, nervously observant. He had thrown away the stick and he put on his cap before he rang the bell.

Lucy opened the door. She smiled, pleased at the sight of his uniform. All soldiers were romantic to Lucy.

"Is this Mr. Osborne's house?" he asked.

She nodded, staring like a child.

"Is he at home?"

"He's in the garden."

"In the garden, is he?" He was silent for a moment, looking past her into the hall, listening for something. "Is Mrs. Osborne in?" he went on.

"No, she's down the village."

"Nobody else in?"

Anyone but Lucy might have grown suspicious, but Lucy thought it natural to ask questions.

"There's only Mr. Osborne and he's in the

garden," she repeated stolidly. "Did you want to see him?"

"Yes. Well, I reckon I do." He hesitated. "Tell him . . . No, I'll tell him that myself. Just say there's a soldier called to see him and I'd take it kindly if he'd spare me a few minutes."

She left him standing in the doorway and went off muttering his message to ensure remembering it. Left alone, he stepped into the hall and gave a swift look round. But he was back in the porch when Geoffrey came in by the garden door.

"Good-morning. You wanted to see me?"

"Good-morning, sir. If you don't mind. . . ."

"Come in." Geoffrey led the way along the passage to his study. "Sit down." He sat down himself behind his desk and the soldier took a chair alongside it, facing him. "Do you smoke?"

The fellow looked nervous, he thought. He wondered if he had come for free legal advice.

"Thank you, sir. I don't mind if I do."

His hand had a slight tremor, Geoffrey observed accustomed to noting such things, and he took time to light the cigarette, postponing the moment of explanation.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Geoffrey prompted him at last.

"Well, sir, it's like this." He avoided Geoffrey's eyes. "The fact is . . ." He tried again. "I understand you've got a little girl billeted here — Doreen Rawlings by name?"

Geoffrey nodded.

"Well, sir, I'm her father." It was out, and unconsciously he drew a deep sigh of relief.

Geoffrey was considerably surprised. He had understood from Francie that Doreen's father was dead and he had to resist an absurd impulse to ask the man if he were sure. Nevertheless, he did not

disbelieve his statement. For one thing, there was a likeness, he could see it now. For another, he had learned to recognise the ring of truth.

"So you're Doreen's father," he commented, to gain a little time. "She isn't expecting you, is she?"

"No, sir. I didn't write. I just came over on the chance, like. I'm stationed at Frentham and I've got a forty-eight hours' pass."

"Then I suppose Mrs. Rawlings gave you this address?"

Again Rawlings hesitated.

"Well, not exactly, sir. We don't communicate, as you might say. But I found out where Doreen was from . . . from another party and I thought I'd like to see her." He glanced round him, as though expecting to find her concealed somewhere in the room.

"She's out at the moment. Out with my wife." Geoffrey was frowning, balancing a paper-knife on his finger, uncertain and taken aback. "You've put me in rather a spot, Rawlings. You see, I've never heard Doreen even mention you; I didn't know till a moment ago that her father was alive and I'm not at all sure that she does. When did you last see her?"

"Four years ago. But she knows I'm alive. I've sent her things from time to time."

Geoffrey's frown did not relax.

"I don't want to seem over-harsh, but I've got to think first of Doreen herself — I'm sure you'll agree with me there. I don't know what her mother's told her about you, and I don't want to upset her, perhaps, and involve her in something she can't properly understand. And apart from that, I've a certain responsibility to Mrs. Rawlings, to your wife. It was she who entrusted Doreen to me, and from

what you say I gather she wouldn't altogether approve of you turning up here?"

Rawlings flushed and shifted in his chair.

"A man's got a right to see his own child, hasn't he?" he asked half defiantly, half pleadingly. "Doreen remembers me, all right. I don't know what yarn her mother spins, but Doreen'll know me when she sees me, I'd take my oath on that. She was always very fond of me, Doreen was. I wouldn't go worrying her with any of the rights and wrongs of it, though I've got my own opinion where the fault lay. I only want to see her, see how she's grown and that, and have a friendly word. I might be going overseas — you never know."

Geoffrey stabbed the paper-knife into the blotter. "Oh, hell," he muttered under his breath. Aloud he said: "Look here, you'd better tell me a bit more about all this. I don't want to pry into your personal affairs, but I'm a solicitor, I must know what the legal position is. You're divorced — separated?"

"Well, we're separated, as you might say," Rawlings explained slowly, "but it's nothing legal. We was married seven years and it was nag, nag all the time until I up and left her. Couldn't stick it any longer. No, not even for the child. There's some things flesh and blood can't bear."

"What about the money side of it?" Geoffrey asked, not looking at him. "You make her an allowance?"

"She didn't want no more to do with me," Rawlings replied rather uneasily. "She said she didn't want no money from me. She's a hard woman, as hard and bitter as they come. Clear out and stay out, she said, and I don't want no more to do with you."

"What about your army pay?" Geoffrey

pressed him. "Surely she wouldn't object to drawing the marriage allowance and the allowance for the child?"

"I reckon she would've, sir. She don't want to be beholden to me."

"That seems to me rather absurd," Geoffrey said judicially. For the moment he had almost forgotten the personal aspect; he was giving judgment on a case. "I think you ought to overrule her there. After all, you must know that she has a pretty hard struggle and she's entitled to that money. It would give Doreen a better chance — you ought to think of that."

Rawlings looked increasingly uneasy. He knocked the ash off his cigarette with great care, his light blue eyes intently fixed on the operation.

"There's more to it than that, sir. It's a bit complicated, like. You see, I've taken up with someone else. *She* draws the wife's allowance. And there's children, too."

This time the pause was quite a long one. When he spoke again, Geoffrey had made up his mind.

"That puts a rather different complexion on things, doesn't it? Frankly, Rawlings, I don't see that you've got any moral right to come here, unknown to your wife, and see Doreen. It might give you some satisfaction, but it can only disturb and upset the child, and if you're honestly fond of her, as I'm sure you are, you won't want to do that. Look at it from her point of view, man. If she tells her mother that she's seen you, there's bound to be some kind of painful discussion about it, quite unsuited to her years, and if she doesn't tell her mother, she'll feel guilty and unhappy. Apart from which, I should feel bound to tell her myself, so it would come out anyhow. Do you really think it's

worth it, with things as they are?" His voice was kind and very persuasive.

Rawlings sighed.

"I reckon you're right, sir. When you put it that way, about looking at it from Doreen's side, I see your point. It was only . . . Well, it's not much consequence." He stood up slowly. "She'll be well, I take it? I'm glad her mother sent her out of London. I used to worry about her, with the bombs. The other children — I've got two, both boys — they've been evacuated from the start."

"She's very well. She likes the country. And we're very fond of her, my wife and I."

"She's in good hands, I can see that. Well, thank you, sir. I'll be getting along."

Touched at finding him so reasonable and so crestfallen, Geoffrey added:

"Why don't you get in touch with her mother and ask her if she'd mind your seeing Doreen occasionally? If she'd agree and write and tell me so, I could prepare Doreen and we could fix up something next time you have leave. I'd be very glad to do what I could."

But Rawlings looked dubious.

"You don't know her like I do, sir, thank you all the same. She wouldn't agree to that in a month of Sundays."

There didn't seem any more to say. Geoffrey accompanied him to the door and they shook hands. The time was half-past twelve.

At one o'clock, Francie and Doreen returned for lunch. Geoffrey did not have a chance to speak to Francie alone before the meal; it wasn't something which could be told in a hurried aside. He would tell her in the afternoon, he decided, while Doreen was out. She was going to pick primroses with the Warman children.

They called for her at half-past two. It was the first fine Saturday of the spring and Doreen's first primrosing expedition. She was filled with the most pleasurable anticipation and, this time, Francie did not interpose too many reservations between her and enjoyment. She was to keep with the others, not get her feet wet and be back before it was dark. If the Warmans invited her home for tea, however, she could accept. Lucy had three hours off in the afternoons and would bring her back when she returned.

The Crossleys were coming to dinner that evening and Francie decided that she would rest on her bed between lunch and tea. There would be plenty to do after that, helping Lucy prepare the meal. Geoffrey said he thought it was a good idea. It would be time enough to tell her about Rawlings' visit later on, he told himself; she would be upset about it and it would spoil her rest. He went back to the garden.

Francie had not meant to fall asleep, but she did so almost at once and only woke when Geoffrey came into the bedroom, carrying a tray of tea. He sat on the foot of the bed, awkwardly balancing the tray on his knee, and pretended to belittle her appreciation. He was, in fact, very much pleased with his own thoughtfulness.

"I cut sandwiches," he pointed out. "I couldn't find any cake."

"Well, actually there is some, darling, but I prefer sandwiches. You've cut them beautifully."

"I do cut sandwiches rather well," he agreed complacently. "Here — take this tray, I'm going to drop it. I'll have my tea with you. I've brought two cups."

They smiled at each other, enjoying themselves. There seemed something mildly romantic about the

occasion. Again Geoffrey decided to postpone bothering her about Rawlings. It might cast a shadow on the evening and he was looking forward to entertaining the Crossleys; they amused him.

"What time is it?" Francie asked.

"Nearly five o'clock. You don't need to start cooking yet, do you?"

"No. I was wondering about Doreen. She must have gone back to tea with the Warmans."

"Well, that's all right — Lucy will bring her home."

But Lucy did not bring her home.

CHAPTER XI

DOREEN picked primroses greedily, with a concentration and persistence which would have seemed strange to the Warman children had they been intelligent enough to recognise those qualities. She had no memory of other country springs nor any instinctive assurance of springs to come. She picked for the fleeting hour — in competition with the hawker's kerb-side basket and the barrows of a score of London streets. Ruthlessly, indefatigably, she despoiled the little coppice, not pausing to admire or smell the flowers, not scorning the most insignificant or elusive bloom.

"You've got the most, Doreen," Betty said without rancour.

She had kicked over a log and was squatting beside it, poking the disturbed woodlice with a twig. One of her brothers was looking for bird's nests in the hedge and the other children were playing a game of tag among the sparse trees.

"You're not trying properly," Doreen pointed out.

"It's too early — there aren't enough. It's no fun when you've got to look for them. You ought to see this wood when they're really out — you can't walk for treading on them."

"Like a yellow carpet?" Doreen prompted her.

"Well, sort of." She looked surprised.

Reassured, Doreen relaxed her search and allowed Betty to tie up her bunch for her. The afternoon had slipped away and with it all the warmth of sunshine which was still no more than tepid. Greens turned to greys and the primroses had a washed-out look. The wood became less friendly and withdrew itself. It was time to go.

"You can come back to tea with us, if you like." Anne invited.

Doreen considered the matter.

"I think I'd better go home and put the flowers in water," she decided.

"All right."

They knew each other too well to be polite about it.

At the Osbornes' gate the Warmans and Doreen parted. For a moment she looked after them as they straggled down the hill, then she turned away and began to walk along the drive, her eyes fixed with proprietory pride on the fat bunch of primroses she carried in both hands. There was a slight bend in the drive and the first few yards of it were out of sight of the house. She did not see the soldier leaning against the trunk of a tree until he made her jump by speaking to her.

"Hullo, Doreen," he said in a quiet, almost sleepy voice.

He pronounced her name as her mother did,

with the accent on the first syllable. She noticed it behind her startled apprehension.

"Don't you remember me?" He straightened himself and moved towards her, slowly, hesitatingly. "I'm your daddy, Doreen. You remember me." His voice was pleading.

"My daddy's not a soldier," Doreen whispered. But she was unconvinced by her own doubts.

"I'm a soldier now, although I didn't use to be. Look!" He took off his cap and knelt on one knee, bringing his face on a level with hers. "You remember me now, don't you? I used to give you toffees of a Saturday."

His breath smelt queer and distasteful. Instinctively, she backed away a little. But it was true that she remembered him.

"Have you come home then?" she asked.

"I've come to see you. Aren't you glad to see your dad? Aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

She kissed him, hastily and unwillingly.

"I live here now," she said. "I've been evacuated."

He did not seem to hear her. Clumsily he got to his feet again, keeping his hand on her shoulder.

"My little girl," he murmured. "My Doreen."

He sounded as though he were going to cry. She looked away from him with an undefined embarrassment.

"Have you seen my mum? Did she send you here?" she questioned, to distract him.

"I went at Christmas, but you wasn't there. I got a present for you—something nice. But you wasn't there." He sounded suddenly aggrieved. "How was I to know you'd been evacuated? Nobody told me. Your mother—she ought to have told me. After all, I am your father, aren't I? I've got a right to know where you are."

Bewildered, Doreen clung to reassuring facts. "I live with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne now," she said. "I like it here."

He glanced round him then, as if remembering for the first time where they were.

"I know their sort. I talked to Mr. Osborne." His tone was resentfully contemptuous. "He means well, but he likes to interfere too much. You'll be well shut of them, I reckon."

Doreen's mouth grew dry with terror.

"Are you going to take me away?" she whispered.

He laughed, good-tempered again, releasing her shoulder and putting his hands in his pockets.

"Where'd I take you? Back to camp? Would you like to be the regimental mascot, eh?" In his new joviality he seemed to think that she had asked to be taken away. "I've only got a forty-eight. A bloody lot of good it's done me, too." The resentment in his voice came back again. "I tell you straight, I wouldn't have come if I'd known the kind of reception I was going to get. I'd planned it all different — I'd planned everything friendly and cosy like." Beneath his aggrievedness there sounded a genuine pain and disappointment. "You'd have thought they'd have asked me in for a cup of tea, wouldn't you? A soldier on leave, that hasn't seen his little girl for four years? Soldiers are all right for fighting and getting killed, while other people sit cushy on their backsides, but you don't ask them in for a cup of tea, oh no!" His tone was heavily ironic. "You're too damn' snobbish and superior. Tea's only served to officers in this joint."

Increasingly bewildered, Doreen fastened on the only phrases she could understand. He wanted a cup of tea and somebody had said he couldn't have one. Immediately everything seemed clear and simple.

"Mrs. Osborne'll give you a cup of tea," she said happily. "We're just going to have tea now." She moved away from him towards the house, looking back invitingly and reassuringly.

But he seized hold of her arm.

"Catch me going up there again! I know when I'm not wanted. Look — you come down the village with me and we'll find a place there. Just you and me, eh? You'd like to pour out for your daddy, wouldn't you? We'll have some cakes and jam — a proper tea in a shop. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

She was most afraid of him when he was affectionate. Old memories, rubbed by the passage of time into the shapeless forms of instinct and foreboding, took outline again, achieved edges that could cut. The obscure contention and the raised voice — her mother's face, set and furious — a slammed door, a smashed plate, her own tears . . . people angry, people hurting each other . . . and afterwards the tension of surface normality, her mother's wordless expectation of allegiance, her father's secretive, placatory endearments. Memory that was not real memory but only the vibration of an explosion across the years, came back to tighten her nerves with an old unease. She did not want to leave the safety of the garden with him.

"I can't go without telling them," she objected.

"You don't want to bother about that," he said impatiently. "You can tell'em when you get back. They don't keep you on a chain, do they?"

"They might worry," she said miserably. But she remembered as she spoke that they would think that she had gone home with the Warmans.

"Let'em worry." He took her hand and began to walk towards the gate, so that she stumbled, dragging back.

"Couldn't you wait just a moment, so that I

can put the primroses in water? They'll die if I don't." She spoke with the cunning of desperation. If she could once get back to the house, this nightmare would end.

He did not bother to answer. He was angry, he was hurt — she recognised his mood instinctively. Once, long ago, he had taken her for a walk through the London streets, on and on in hurt and angry silence, until she had been whimpering with fatigue and fright. He had walked so fast the she could only keep up with him by trotting, and a woman had stopped him in the street and spoken to him in a scolding voice, pointing at her. He had been angry with the woman too, but when she had gone he had picked up Doreen and carried her. Then they had got on a bus and ridden on the outside, for a treat, and he had tried to cheer her up. But she had gone on crying. It was dark when they got home and her mother was standing in the doorway. He started to say something, but she interrupted him. "You've been drinking," she said. "Don't you never dare go near the child again when you've been drinking." And she had slapped his face.

That was a long time ago. But going down the hill, Doreen remembered it.

They passed the Warmans' cottage, but nobody came out. They passed a girl whom Doreen knew in school and she looked at them curiously but did not stop and speak. Then came the shops round the station, three in all, and Doreen saw a gleam of hope. She tugged at his arm.

"That's the baker's shop. They do teas there."

He looked at it doubtfully and rather contemptuously.

"Isn't there a proper teashop?"

"No, there's only the baker's."

"Well, I suppose it's better than nothing."

Mrs. Hennessey was behind the counter. She looked surprised to see Doreen with a soldier, surprised and suspicious. They sat down at one of the marble topped tables and she came forward to serve them herself.

"Hullo, Doreen. Out to tea?"

She stared at Rawlings openly, her regard an unspoken, unavoidable interrogation.

"Introduce me, Doreen," he said shortly.

"This is my dad, Mrs. Hennessey." Her voice was flat, without emotion.

Immediately Mrs. Hennessey's manner changed.

"Your dad! Well, that is nice! I can see the likeness. So you've come to see if Doreen's being a good girl, Mr. Rawlings?"

Mollified and pleased, he smiled back at her.

"That's right. I'm on short leave, over from Frentham. I thought I'd take the chance, being so near."

"And I'm sure she's very happy to see you," Mrs. Hennessey said indulgently. "It isn't every little girl that has a soldier for a daddy. I only wish I'd more in the shop to offer you, but late on the Saturday we're all but sold out. I can do you scones and jam, with plain cake to follow."

"That'll do fine."

He looked so happy and everything appeared so comfortable and normal that Doreen began to feel ashamed of her earlier panic. Perhaps he was quite nice, really; Mrs. Hennessey seemed to think so. Something had happened to make him cross, but now he was in a good temper again and the situation, the whole world, had changed. She watched him surreptitiously, trying, and failing, to see the likeness to herself and he caught her eye and smiled at her with a wry mixture of apology and love and something almost like conspiracy. "I know I

behaved badly up there on the hill," his smile seemed to say, "but I meant well and I trust you not to give me away." Half against her will she smiled back.

"Do you go to school here?" he asked.

"Not at first I didn't, but I do now."

"Top of your class?" he teased.

"Oh no! But I've moved up one."

"That's a good girl. Looks like you're a better scholar than your dad was. Plenty of cane, that was all I got at school."

He laughed, pretending to rub old scars, and Doreen laughed with him, though a little anxiously.

Mrs. Hennessey, honouring the occasion, carried the tray to the table herself.

"There you are then! Who's going to pour out?"

"Ladies pour out," he joked.

"Well, mind you don't scald yourself, dear. It's a big pot. My, what a lovely bunch of primroses! Did your daddy help you pick them?"

"No, I went with the Warmans." She was suddenly self-conscious again, remembering that last desperate wriggle to escape.

"Quite a bouquet you've got."

Tactful and friendly, she retired behind the counter once more. Doreen poured out the tea and spread a scone with margarine and jam. A part of her felt hungry, but another part of her felt rather sick.

"Them Osbornes," he said suddenly, "what are they like?"

"They're very nice — they're good. I like it there." It was somehow important to convince him and she spoke with great earnestness.

"Treat you decent, do they?"

"Oh, *yes*"

"Well, I suppose you might have gone farther and fared worse." He was in a more tolerant mood now. "Not that I've much use for that sort. You're as good as them any day, and don't let them forget it. If they ever try to come it over you with their la-di-da-di ways, you just drop me a line and I'll pretty soon make them change their tune. You don't have to stop with them, you know."

The gulf between them was so wide that she looked across it almost despairingly.

"But Dad, I *want* to stop with them. It's lovely here. I'd like to stay here always, if Mum was here too."

He grunted, irrationally displeased.

"What's so nice about it, then?"

"It's just . . . different. I can't explain." But she was trying to. "The country's nicer than London. London's so dirty. And Mr. Osborne goes for walks with me and tells me all about different things. And then when I go down the village with Mrs. Osborne, everybody knows us and says good-morning. And I can play in the garden and it's all mine. And once they took me to Oxford and we had lunch in a hotel." She broke off, feeling helpless to convey the differences.

"He took the teapot and poured himself another cup. She saw, with a sinking of the heart, that he was frowning.

"You don't take long to settle down, do you?" he said curtly. "Well, I reckon it *is* all a bit different to what you've been used to — posh house, maid to open the door, everything cushy. It seems to me your mother made a big mistake in sending you down here. You get too used to living soft and next thing you'll be thinking home's not good enough."

Doreen began to cry, silently, her face puckered, her heart sore. She understood perfectly well

that she was being accused of disloyalty, and no scolding could have hurt her as much as that reproach. Her tears were not only for the moment, they were the same tears she had shed on Christmas Day. She cried because she had learned to love more than one person and it seemed that this was some kind of crime. How could you help loving people when they loved you and were kind? Why were people angry with you for it? She did not very much mind what this stranger, her father, thought about her, but now it seemed that she was hurting Mum all over again.

"For Christ's sake," he muttered, "stow it." He looked round uneasily, but Mrs. Hennessey was serving customers and they were unobserved. "Anyone'd think I'd slapped you or something. Come on, there's a good girl, eat a bit of cake! Here it looks a bit dry — I'll give you my jam to spread on it."

From sheer despair, Doreen stopped. Tears were a language, but they had failed to communicate as completely as had her words. He didn't understand and it was no use trying. But she felt the weight of them, unshed, like a physical pressure.

"Eat up," he urged her. "I want to get out of here. I've had about enough of everything today. I'm moving on."

She was filled with an enormous relief. He was going. In a little while it might seem that he had never come. She bolted the cake and finished her cup of tea. The clock above the counter said half-past five. If she hurried, she could still catch Lucy before she went back up the hill.

"When's the next train to London?" her father asked.

"I don't know. But it's written up at the station," she added helpfully.

"I'll take it, even if it's a slow one. No point

in hanging about." He got up and went to the counter to pay.

"Was the tea to your liking?" Mrs. Hennessey enquired.

"Fine, thanks." Out of temper, his tone was perfunctory. "Come on, Doreen."

She jumped up with alacrity.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Hennessey."

"Good-bye, Doreen. Good-bye, Mr. Rawlings."

He saluted her smartly and for a moment Doreen felt almost proud of him.

Unfortunately, there was no train for half an hour. Doreen hoped that he would tell her not to wait, but it did not seem to occur to him. They stood in the deserted ticket hall, its walls hung with railway time-tables and old-fashioned pictures of West Country holiday resorts. There was a bench against the platform wall and another facing it, beneath the permanently blacked-out window. One dirty electric bulb without a shade cast a hard, inadequate light. The station appeared deserted, as though no trains had passed through it that day and none was expected. Rawlings swore.

"Nice, dead-alive hole this is and no mistake. It beats me what you find to like about the place. I'll go nuts if I sit here half an hour. Look, I'm going to get myself a drink. I shan't be gone above five minutes. You wait here till I come back, see?"

"Wait here alone?" Doreen echoed dubiously.

"Only for five minutes. There's a pub just over the way. I can't take you with me, see, and it's warmer here than standing outside. You stay here like a good girl and I'll give you something nice when I get back."

Doreen sat down on the edge of the wooden bench and listend to the sound of his heavy boots retreating from her across the station yard. When

that sound ceased, there was complete silence. To comfort herself, she sniffed the primroses, already wilting. It was impossible to believe that she had picked them only that same afternoon — in a secure and pleasant world immeasurably removed from the fantastic present. It occurred to her that once her father was safely inside the "Black Horse" there would be nothing to prevent her running home to safety. But then, she believed, he would not catch the train to London. He would come after her, and be angry with them all. He might even say that he was going to take her away with him. It was not worth the appalling risk.

The five minutes became ten minutes and then fifteen. Now the station began to come to life. The ticket-window remained closed, but she could hear someone moving about in the office and two labourers wheeled in bicycles and propped them against the wall. A fast train went through with a shower of sparks and blind, flashing windows. Cramped and cold, Doreen moved to the doorway and stood staring out into the yard, looking for her father with increasing uneasiness. It was ten minutes to the hour. The flap of the ticket-window opened with a sharp click and a few people, none of whom she knew, began to collect. They carried shopping-baskets and paper parcels, they spoke with the local accent. None of them looked as though they were going to London on the slow six o'clock train. There were only five minutes to go now. At last she saw him.

He did not apologise for having been away so long. He went straight into the office and re-emerged with a kit-bag and gas-mask. There was some argument about his ticket, which she did not understand. He sounded jovial and unhurried.

"Over the bridge," the porter told him. "It's signalled."

"Good-bye, Daddy," Doreen said hastily, putting up her face to be kissed.

But he disregarded the gesture.

"Come on," he said, "it's the other side of the line."

"But I haven't got a platform ticket," she protested.

"I've got your ticket — don't fuss."

Surprised and unwilling, she hurried along beside him down the platform and across the railway bridge. The train was already drawing in — not a grand, London train with a corridor, but the shabby, old-fashioned kind that meant you had to change. The porter was shouting the names of the stations and everyone seemed flustered and determined. Rawlings opened a door, saw the carriage was full and slammed it shut again. Lumbering, he ran along the platform and Doreen ran after him.

"Take your seats, please," the porter called out.

Doreen had a moment of panic. He was going to lose the train, he was going to be left behind. Then she saw him open the door of another compartment and throw his kit-bag on a seat. He came towards her, grinning, and again she put up her face to be kissed. But as he bent down towards her, she felt herself gripped by the arms and swung off her feet. Struggling, she was lifted in the air and thrust into the compartment. The door slammed behind him as the train began to move.

CHAPTER XII

When Lucy returned without Doreen and with no knowledge of her, Francie was terrified. Her fear communicated itself to Lucy, who became incoherent

and so contradictory in her statements that Geoffrey cycled down the hill to question Mrs. Warman. Yes, it was true that Doreen had not come back to tea; the children testified that they had last seen her walking up the drive to the house. At that point, Geoffrey's unspoken suspicions crystallised into certainty; he knew that she had met her father.

Before making any further enquiries, he rang up Francie from the village call-box and reported what he had discovered. In the hope of reassuring her, he also told her, briefly, of Rawlings' visit that morning.

"So there's no need to get into a panic. He's obviously taken her somewhere, which he had no business to do, but no real harm can have come to her—he's a perfectly rational type of man and obviously fond of her. He'll probably bring her back by bedtime."

Francie said only:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, I didn't want to worry you. I was going to tell you later."

It sounded rather lame and his voice was apologetic. There was a pause and then she rang off. He realised with surprise and dismay that she was very angry with him.

Instinct sent him next to make enquiries at the "Black Horse". The publican recognised Rawlings' description at once. he had had some drinks there in the morning and had returned for more just before closing time. At half-past five he had come back again and swallowed several in succession. He had seemed out of temper and in a hurry and had spoken of a train to catch.

Geoffrey went on to the station and here found indisputable proof. The man in the ticket office remembered that the soldier who had booked his

kit earlier in the day had taken a child's single fare to London when he collected it. The porter remembered that a soldier with a little girl had caught the slow six o'clock with a second to spare. Geoffrey thanked them, tipped them and cycled home. He felt uneasy and unhappy. Gentle, uncritical Francie was angry with him, and Doreen, so easily made afraid, had been bullied or enticed away by a man who was virtually a stranger to her and who had almost certainly had too much to drink. Where in God's name would he have taken her? And what was Mrs. Rawlings going to say?

Francie was waiting for him at the gate, but she did not greet him.

"I've found out that they caught the six o'clock train to London," he began immediately. "He can't have kidnapped her by force, so I suppose he must have told her some yarn — that he was taking her to see her mother, probably. I can only imagine that he acted out of some sort of spite — annoyed because I wouldn't let him see her. But he'll come to his senses in the morning. He only has forty-eight hours' leave and I doubt he'd risk overstaying it. He'll probably drop her off here on his way back to Frentham, where he's stationed."

"What train are we catching?" she asked simply, as though she had not heard his last sentence. They were walking up the drive, the bicycle between them.

"There's one that connects at Oxford with a train reaching London just after nine o'clock," Geoffrey replied.

"We shall never be able to catch that! It's past seven already."

"I meant nine o'clock tomorrow morning. There's no train this evening which would get us there before mid-night. We can't start searching London for her at that hour."

She stopped walking so abruptly that he had taken several paces beyond her before he realised it. He could not see her face, but her voice was one that he had never heard before.

"Wait until tomorrow! I don't know what you mean. Are you really expecting me to shrug my shoulders and go to bed to-night? That man must be half crazy — we don't know what he may not do with her. Supposing he just abandons her — she'd be terrified. You don't even really know he is her father, just because he said so. We've got to get in touch with Mrs. Rawlings at once, and after that, with the police."

"But Francie," he said pleadingly, "what can any of us do before morning? I swear to you he is her father — there's a strong likeness between them, for one thing. And I'm certain he'd not let her come to any real harm. I'm not being casual about this. I'm just as upset and anxious as you are, and I feel wretchedly ashamed and responsible for not having foreseen something of the kind. If I'd told you about Rawling's visit, you'd probably have taken some precautions — I admit that. But, honestly, I don't think we can help by going up to-night. We shall only frighten Mrs. Rawlings into fits and she'll be just as powerless as we are. I think it's extremely unlikely that we'll even be able to contact her. You can't pick up a taxi in the small hours nowadays."

Francie walked on again.

"I shall go up tonight," she said evenly. "You can do as you like."

She pushed open the door and went into the house. Swearing quietly, Geoffrey propped his bicycle against the wall.

He was surprised to find the Crossleys in the drawing-room; he had forgotten all about them. They looked serious and strangely business-like.

Francie had disappeared upstairs and he was glad of her absence while he gave them a brief account of the facts.

"So I suppose we'll have to leave almost at once," he finished. "I'm sorry this had to happen the evening we'd invited you to dinner. You'll stay and eat, of course."

"It's a good thing we're here," Cynthia said briskly. "Tristram, go and cut some sandwiches for them, and fill a thermos, if they've got one. I think we'd better stay here till you get back," she went on. "In case anyone telephones. Does Doreen know your number?"

"I'm pretty sure she does. She sometimes 'phones me at the office. Mrs. Rawlings knows it, anyhow. Though, between ourselves, I'm not very hopeful that he'll take Doreen anywhere near her mother, of all people."

"Would Doreen have the sense to go to the police if she were stranded?"

"God knows. I've no idea in what light she regards them. She's friendly with the local bobbies here, but that's rather different."

"You'd better 'phone Truffitt for a car to take you to the station," Cynthia reminded him.

"I will. You're being very helpful, you and Tristram. I'm grateful, and Francie would be if she could think of anything except Doreen."

"Poor Francie," Cynthia said gently.

When he had ordered the car, he went into the kitchen. Tristram was cutting very neat sandwiches, under Lucy's goggle-eyed regard. Geoffrey instructed her to serve dinner when it was ready and to make up beds for Mr. and Mrs. Crossley. Earlier she had wept hysterically, but now she seemed to be enjoying the excitement. Then, unable to postpone it any longer, he went upstairs to find Francie.

She was packing a case and she did not look up as he entered the room. At the sight of her pale face, taut with suspense, his feelings of irritation and grievance were overcome by tenderness. She had had a bad shock; he had not made enough allowance for it. He knelt down beside her, took her hands and kissed them penitently.

"Don't be angry with me. It's bad enough without that. Are you packing that case for me, too?"

"I will if you want me to," she said in an unsteady voice.

"You didn't seriously think I'd let you go alone?" He moved about the room, handing her things to put in. "I've ordered a car and Tristram's cutting us some sandwiches. They're going to stay the night, in case there's any message on the telephone. Their own idea — I think it's very decent of them. I suppose we shall manage to get it at some hotel. I believe they're fairly empty at the moment. Don't forget to take your identity card."

Francie said "yes" to everything, but he did not think that she was listening. He wondered what nightmarish pictures were forming in her mind and it occurred to him that he would be feeling far more acutely anxious about Doreen himself if he were not so much concerned for Francie. How single and how selfish was the average heart! He acknowledged that the wish to right himself with Francie had driven fear for Doreen almost into the background. That was contemptible. It meant that Francie's good opinion was probably of more importance to him than anything else in the world. A pleasing sentiment for lovers, but a confession of egotism too.

When they eventually went downstairs again, Cynthia had tea waiting for them and Francie drank it gratefully. She listened to them talking, saying calm, reassuring things, and was grateful for that as

well. Particularly when Tristram announced that he would like to paint Doreen in the Easter holidays; it sounded so secure and certain.

"But portraits aren't your line at all," Cynthia objected. "The only times you've tried to paint me, the results have been libellous."

"Because I can't paint you, it doesn't mean I can't paint Doreen," Tristram said mildly. "I believe I could. I'd like to try, at any rate."

"I'll commission you," Geoffrey said lightly. "I've always fancied myself as a patron of the arts. I once bought a water-colour — it's hanging in my study now."

"I know. I'm afraid it's not a very good one," Tristram deprecated.

They all laughed conscientiously, but it was a relief when Mac's frenzied barking announced the arrival of the car.

Truffitt asked no questions, but his manner was concerned and sympathetic. Geoffrey deduced that he had visited the "Black Horse" that evening; the story was probably round the whole village by now. Bad luck on Doreen, if so — supposing she returned with them, and he was not going to suppose anything else. He wondered where Rawlings had taken the child between four and six o'clock. Well, that would probably come out too, in time.

The train journey seemed interminable. It was impossible to read by the dimmed light, and in any case he had not brought a book, for fear that Francie would think him callous. They sat opposite each other in silence and an odd constraint. Geoffrey's most familiar nightmare, that he might be going to have an attack of asthma, began to take possession of his mind. It was all nonsense, he told himself — pure nerves. To banish it, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Dozing fitfully, he dreamt

that it was his wedding-day again, that he was waiting for Francie at the church and she had not come.

Francie did not sleep; she was remembering. She remembered an occasion, nearly thirty years before, when she had been put in a train by one of her step-sisters to be met at the other end by another of them. Somehow a misunderstanding had arisen and she had passed through the barrier at Victoria Station to find herself alone. She had stayed by the barrier while all the other passengers hurried by her, holding her small case and the return half of her ticket, for what had seemed at least an hour. Then the ticket inspector had noticed her and asked her kindly if somebody was coming to collect her. His sympathy unnerved her completely and she had burst into tears. After that, quite a number of people had gathered around, demanding her name and where she came from, until finally, clinging to the hand of the woman from the sweet kiosk, she had seen her grownup sister anxiously scanning the crowd for her. She had let go the consoling hand and run to meet her, bursting into tears afresh, and her sister had been so relieved that she had scolded her heartily and the onlookers had murmured and dispersed. Francie would have liked to thank these people who had come to her assistance but her sister had hurried her away. In after years she had looked for them, but she found that she had forgotten their faces. She had never forgotten the hysterical terror she had felt at being lost and unclaimed among strangers. The recollection of it, even now, could make her shiver. For now the child that she had been herself was changed into another child. It was Doreen who faced that menacing loneliness.

As the train approached London, the lights went out completely. Someone in the carriage said that that meant an air-raid warning had been sound-

ed. Geoffrey woke up and looked across at Francie uneasily. He had not bargained for an air-raid on top of everything else.

"Better drink that coffee," he suggested. "We're not likely to get anything when we arrive."

She drank obediently but she refused the sandwiches. Feeling guilty but hungry, Geoffrey ate his share. It was hard to believe that anything quite so unpleasant could be happening. Twelve hours ago, he had been peacefully engaged in sowing onion seed, completely unprepared for such a revolution in his life. It would be a nice irony, he reflected, if they were both killed by a bomb as the indirect result of Private Rawlings' ill-timed visit to his daughter.

Francie's eyes had darkened at the mention of an air-raid, but she made no comment. Geoffrey was perfectly well aware that she was only concerned with it as a possible danger to Doreen. He recognised the fact with a certain wryness, for he knew that if he were to find a raid in progress he would be personally very much afraid.

It was therefore with enormous relief that he heard the All Clear sound as they were walking off the platform. Not far from the station was an hotel where he had often stayed before and he led Francie there without bothering to try to hire a taxi. Although he had remembered to pocket a torch, they made slow progress in the unfamiliar, unlit streets. Very few people seemed to be about, and those who were walked hurriedly, intent on reaching somewhere else before another warning sounded. Once they passed a tin-hatted air-raid warden, and Geoffrey looked at him curiously and a little jealously.

When they arrived at the darkened frontage of the hotel, Geoffrey pressed the Night Bell, expecting to be let in by a sleepy, grumbling porter. But

the lounge hall seemed full of people, wide awake, fully clothed and trailing blankets. The receptionist booked them a room rather grudgingly but without demur. Geoffrey felt that everyone was staring at them, as if the place were not an hotel but a private club. There was a curious atmosphere abroad, a kind of solidarity which shut out strangers. From scraps of conversation overheard, he gathered that the raid had been a sharp one, mostly concentrated on the West End. But he asked no questions, pretending to himself that it was wiser not to risk increasing Francie's fears, secretly apprehensive of violating some peculiar taboo. He felt himself to be an alien, an intrusive, uninitiated countryman, and Francie, silent and detached as a sleep-walker, gave him no support.

Their room was on the third floor. Too high up, Geoffrey thought privately, and wondered whether, if there were another raid that night, he would have courage enough to suggest to Francie that they went downstairs. When the door closed behind the porter who had carried up their bag, she crossed to the window and stood with her hand on the curtain-cord.

"Put out the light," she said.

Surprised, he obeyed and she pulled back the heavy, black-lined curtains. He joined her at the window and they stood side by side, looking out across the roof-tops. There was only a crescent moon, but the sky was filled with a warm, pulsating flush.

"Fire," Francie said.

"Yes. A big one, I'm afraid."

He shivered. He had always had a dread of fire.

"Why does the light keep changing?"

"Something exploding, I suppose." He shivered again, uncontrollably.

"You're cold."

"No, I'm frightened."

She moved back and pulled the curtains too.

"What time is it?" she asked, when he had groped to the door and switched on the light once more.

"Nearly one o'clock." She did not comment and he went on: "We'd better try to get some sleep. God knows, I'm tired enough. You must be too."

"I suppose so. I don't feel sleepy."

"We can't do anything more tonight," he argued, as though in answer to something which she had not said. "The tubes and buses have stopped running and we'd never find a taxi. We'll start directly it's morning."

"Yes." But still she made no move.

"This room's damned cold. I don't believe the heat is working." He began to take off his clothes, though he felt oddly defenceless without them. "Did you remember to pack any soap?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Well, there's none here. We'll have to go unwashed." Forlorn and disgruntled, he climbed into bed. "Aren't you coming?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm coming."

Slowly, almost dreamily, she undressed too, turned off the light, pulled back the curtains and climbed in beside him. In silence, not touching, they lay and watched the pink glow in the sky.

CHAPTER XIII

DOREEN thought that everybody in the railway carriage was looking at them. It was true that their precipitous entry had startled the other passengers and aroused in them the automatic antagonism of

those seated in moderate comfort towards later arrivals wanting space to sit; but at the sight of a soldier and a child, a quiet-looking little girl, resentment had died. People had made room and one or two of them had even smiled at Doreen. Yet still it seemed to her that everybody stared and wondered. It was as if they knew how she had come to be there and were taking sides between her and her father. Under their eyes, conscious of their attention, she could not bring herself to question him. Where were they going? What was he going to do with her? Perhaps if the compartment had been empty she would still not have found the courage to ask him. She was so much afraid of the replies.

When they first got in and he had found a place on the rack for his kit and slumped down into a seat opposite her, he had given her a grin that was compounded of sheepishness, defiance and a kind of triumph. She had not smiled back. If this were a joke, she did not see it. In the face of her taut solemnity, he had retreated into a pretence of slumber which had soon become genuine. He slept with his cap off, his fair hair ruffled and his mouth open. Freed from the awkwardness of meeting his regard, Doreen gazed and gazed at him. She was not really frightened of him but she was frightened of the situation, and when she thought about Mr. and Mrs. Osborne she wanted to cry. Lucy would be back by now and they would wonder what had happened to her. Perhaps they would think she was dead. She pictured them searching the wood for her, frantic, calling her name. Nobody would ever know about her father and getting on the train. Yes, Mrs. Hennessey knew about her father. When Mrs. Hennessey heard that she was lost, she would tell about them having tea in the shop. She imagined Mrs. Hennessey toiling up the hill to tell her

story. But that would be tomorrow. Nobody would know tonight.

It was hot in the carriage and she wondered if she should take off her coat. It was her old coat and she was wearing her old shoes too. It seemed wrong to be going in a train in the clothes she wore for playing in the garden. Mum wouldn't like that at all. And at the thought of Mum she did begin to cry. Her lips trembled and tears overflowed her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She caught them with her tongue and sniffed, feeling in her pocket to find a handkerchief. A voice close to her ear said gently:

"What's the matter?"

It was the lady in the corner. Doreen had noticed her least of anyone, but she looked at her now and thought that she had a nice face though she was quite old. She was as old as Mrs. Renshawe and had the same kind of face. Doreen longed to tell her about everything, but she was afraid to do so with her father sitting opposite, even though he was asleep. He might wake up in the middle and be angry. So she said only:

"I can't find my hankie."

"Isn't it in your pocket?"

"No. I've looked."

"Perhaps you tucked it in your knickers."

This struck Doreen as a practical and intelligent suggestion, and she found that sure enough she had. Blowing her nose, she stopped crying, anxious not to be questioned further.

"My little girls always used to tuck their hankies in their knickers," the lady went on in her friendly voice. "But they're too big now; they're both grown up."

"Did you used to tuck yours in your knickers?" Doreen enquired, glad of a diversion from her thoughts.

"I wore very old-fashioned clothes when I was a little girl. I didn't have knickers with elastic at the knee, only frilly drawers. You wouldn't have liked those at all, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't." That sounded rather rude, so she added quickly: "Though I expect they were very nice really."

"No, they were very silly and impractical."

There seemed no more to say about knickers and the conversation threatened to come to an end, but for some reason unknown to Doreen, the lady evidently meant to go on talking. She said now:

"You nearly missed the train, didn't you?"

"Yes"

Doreen's lips trembled again, remembering, and instinctively she looked across at her father. The lady looked across at him too. He looked silly, sleeping with his mouth open, and Doreen felt ashamed of him.

"My Dad's a soldier," she said, with an odd defensiveness.

"Yes, I see he is," the lady said kindly. "And are you his only little girl?"

"Oh yes."

Unconsciously she sighed. She felt suddenly very tired. She would have liked to put her head on the lady's shoulder and go to sleep too — sleep and wake up in her own bed in her own room, with Mrs. Osborne bending over her. Yawning, she closed her eyes and felt tears pricking them. They forced their way under her lids, burningly hot, and began to trickle down her cheeks again.

"Why, what a lovely bunch of primroses!" the lady said.

Doreen opened her eyes and looked at her swimmily.

"They're nearly dead," she said in a choked voice.

"Oh, but they'll soon revive in water. You must put them in water directly you get home and they'll be quite fresh by the morning."

"I picked them ever such a long time ago. In a wood. I wanted to put them in water then but he wouldn't let me." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper and she looked at her father with fear in her face. "I picked them to send to my Mum — in a box. But they're no use now. Would you like them?"

"I couldn't take your lovely primroses," the lady protested, "though it's very sweet of you to offer them, my dear."

"Yes, you take them." She held them out to her eagerly. "Then you can put them in water and they won't die. Are you going to London too?"

"No, I'm getting out at Oxford. That's where you'll have to change if you're bound for London."

"I've been to Oxford," Doreen boasted, brightening. "I had lunch at a hotel, at the Randolph Hotel. Is that where you're going?"

"Good gracious, no! Nowhere as grand as that." The lady looked surprised and amused. "Did your father take you there?"

"Oh no. Mr. and Mrs. Osborne took me. I live with them now — I've been evacuated." The anxiety came back into her face and voice. "They'll be ever so worried about me. They don't know my Dad's taken me with him in a train. Perhaps they'll think I'm dead."

The lady looked exceedingly bewildered.

"Do you mean that these people you're living with don't *know* you're with your father?"

Doreen shook her head, her eyes bright with tears and alarm.

"But — what a very extraordinary thing." She stared at the sleeping soldier and then at Doreen, astonishment and a shade of incredulity in her expression. "And your mother — where is she?"

"She lives in London."

The lady's expression cleared.

"Ah well, then, that's all right, isn't it? Your father's taking you to join your mother. You'll be able to give her the primroses in person."

This was an entirely new idea to Doreen. She considered it with hope and doubt.

"Do you think he will? He never said so." She felt that she ought to explain to the lady about Mum and Dad, but embarrassment and loyalty kept her silent. "I wouldn't mind if I was going to see Mum," she finished.

The lady gave a little laugh, kindly but faintly chiding too.

"Why don't you ask your father where he's taking you? He can't mind that, surely."

"Perhaps I will ask him when he wakes up," Doreen agreed cautiously.

"I think you'd better wake him now. We're drawing into Oxford."

She stood up and began to take down her parcels from the luggage-rack. Doreen looked at her father and wondered how she should rouse him. But the movement in the carriage had already done so. He opened his eyes, yawned and made a grimace as though he had a bad taste in his mouth.

"We've got to change here," Doreen said timidly.

"Where are we?"

"Oxford."

The lady in the corner got out first. She smiled at Doreen as she passed and patted her cheek.

"Good-bye," she said.

"Aren't you going to take the primroses?" Doreen asked, disappointed.

"If you're sure you really want me to. Thank you, dear. I'll put them in a pretty bowl directly I get home."

She smiled again but a little uncertainly, glancing from Doreen to the lolling, drowsy figure of her father. Doubt came back into her face. But it was too late now. The stream of people carried her away. A kind-hearted woman, devoted to children, she would always wonder whether there was something she had left undone.

Rawlings collected his kit, jerked his head at Doreen and followed her out of the compartment.

"What was that old geyser saying to you?" he asked suspiciously.

"She only said I had a lovely bunch of primroses. So I gave them to her."

"What did you want to do that for?"

"I didn't want them to die."

"Is that all she said?"

"That's all." It was easy to tell lies, Doreen realised with surprise. You just said something and if the other person didn't know any different, they had to believe you.

"Here, wait where you are while I find out when our train's due." He walked off down the platform.

Doreen watched the people filing through the barrier. It would be easy to follow them, to hide where her father could not find her. She might catch up with the lady and ask her to take her home with her, or she could go to the Randolph Hotel and ask them to 'phone Mr. Osborne and tell him where she was. But it was dark outside and she might lose herself. It was too big an adventure.

When her father rejoined her, she said:

"I want to go to the lavatory."

"O.K. You've got time. You can go by yourself, can't you?" He sounded rather disconcerted.

"Oh yes. But I haven't got a penny."

"Here's a penny. I'll wait for you outside."

When she came out again, he took her hand and gave it a little squeeze. It was as if he had been touched and pleased that she had asked him for a penny. Emboldened, Doreen risked her question.

"Dad, where are we going to in London?"

He did not answer for a moment and Doreen became aware of the beating of her heart.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked at last, gruffly.

"I'd like to go to Mum." Her voice was very low.

"Well, that's where I'm taking you."

"Oh." She did not dare show her relief. It was a relief so great that for a moment she felt physically exhausted and her legs trembled.

"Is that all you've got to say?"

She could not tell from his tone whether he was angry or good-humoured, but she went on bravely:

"Why are you taking me away from Mr. and Mrs. Osborne?"

"Never you mind about that." His voice this time was definitely curt. "It's enough that I've got my reasons."

They did not speak again until the London train drew in, and of the second half of the journey Doreen remembered little. They sat side by side and she fell asleep almost at once, her head resting against his arm. Most of the time he slept again himself, but sometimes he looked down at her relaxed face with an expression at once tender and regretful.

The discovery, when the train drew in at Paddington, that there was an air-raid in progress sobered him finally. He had forgotten about air-raids. London had been enjoying a short lull while

the provinces took their turn and, in any case, he was unused to raids. Guns were in action and the station was almost deserted. The train emptied rapidly, some passengers making for the shelters, others for the Underground. Rawlings chose the latter. He was suddenly acutely anxious to be rid of his responsibility. Paying unconscious tribute to the stronger character, he felt that everything would be all right when he had handed Doreen over to her mother.

Sensing his uneasiness, Doreen was infected by it. For the first time in her life, she felt frightened of the raid. The barrage was much heavier than any she had heard before and she had forgotten how to distinguish between shell and bomb. Crossing the vast, exposed area of Paddington Station was like traversing a lonely plain where wild beasts lurked. They took it almost at a run, and going down the stairs they could still hear the roaring of the guns — the wild beasts frustrated of their prey.

"Does your mother sleep out in a shelter?" he asked her when they were safely in the train.

"Not now she doesn't. Sometimes she goes down to Mrs. Freeman in the basement. When it's noisy."

"Then I guess she's there tonight," he muttered.

He had rather particular reasons for not wishing to meet Mrs. Freeman, but it couldn't be helped.

"She'll be ever so surprised to see us," Doreen said, yawning. "I wish we were there now. I wish I was in bed. I'm hungry, Dad."

"Your mother'll give you something to eat."

Secure for the moment from bombs, there was nothing to protect him from the more complex ordeal ahead. In a short while now, he would have to face his wife and make his explanations. It was bloody bad luck that there had to be a raid tonight

of all nights. She wasn't going to take kindly to his having brought Doreen home to this.

When they alighted at their station, both looked curiously at the shelterers on the platform. Doreen rather envied them. It was bright and warm down here — better than the shelter where she had slept before. She wondered why her mother had always set her face against the Underground.

"You stay here while I go up top and have a look round," her father commanded her, when they reached the foot of the escalator. "We'll have to wait till there's a bit of a lull."

She seized his arm.

"Don't leave me — take me with you. I don't want to be alone."

"You won't be alone with all this crowd. I've got to leave you, see? That stuff the guns are sending up has got to come down. You don't want a bit of that on your head, do you?"

"I'd rather go with you," she pleaded.

He looked about him rather desperately and caught the eye of a stout woman propped against the wall, with two sleeping children lying alongside her.

"This lady'll look after you while I'm away," he said. "Won't you, missus? My little girl don't like staying on her own and I've got to go up top and see if the coast's clear."

"That's right, dear — I'll look after you," the stout woman said affably. "Come and sit along of me." She patted a very dirty cushion in a gesture of invitation.

Doreen was by now resigned to the good intentions of strange women. She did not want to sit on the dirty cushion, but she did as she was told, following with unhappy eyes her father's progress up the escalator.

"Where d'you live, dear?" the stout woman enquired.

"Dakers Place. It's not far."

"I know Dakers Place. Off Colefax Street, with a paper-shop at the corner? That's right. 'Ad a few dropped round there, ain't they?"

"I don't know. I've been evacuated."

The woman glanced at the sleeping children.

"I don't 'old with evacuation. Tried it once and that was enough. They're a funny lot in the country, though I reckon there's all sorts wherever you go. Your dad fetched you 'ome, then?"

"Yes."

"Didn't pick a very good night, did'e? You'd be better off down 'ere with me tonight. You're welcome, dearie, if you'd like to stay. Always rooms for a little 'un, as the saying goes."

"Thank you very much," Doreen said politely, "but I'm going home to my Mum."

"Going 'ome to your Mum — well, that's different. She'd be wondering what'd 'appened to you. 'Ere, 'ave a bit o' cake. It's quite 'olesome — I made it myself."

Doreen ate the cake gratefully; she was conscious of having missed her supper. She decided that she liked the stout woman very much — better than the lady in the train, though she had been nice, too.

"Is that your little boy and girl?" she asked, looking at the sleeping children.

"The boy's my youngest and the little girl's a neighbour's child — 'er mother's in 'ospital, 'aving a baby. Sid and Gladys, their names are. What's yours, love?"

"Doreen. Doreen Rawlings."

"That's a pretty name. The kids'll be ever so disappointed when I tell'em about you in the morning, but it ain't right to wake 'em up, is it? I don't

'old with kids sitting up all hours. Down 'ere they run round till the trains stop, most of 'em. I don't 'old with that. All my children went to bed before nine o'clock till they'd left school."

"Have you got a lot of children then?" Doreen enquired.

"Six!" the stout woman said triumphantly. "All grown up and out in the world, bar Sid. 'E was a bit of an afterthought, as you might say. I've got two boys in the Army, two girls married and the other in munitions. I got a grandson! Ain't it rich? Uncle Sid we call this one, and 'im only seven!"

Doreen thought this the most amusing thing she had ever heard and she joined in the stout woman's laughter without reserve. For the moment she had forgotten the raid, and Mum and Dad and Mr. and Mrs. Osborne and all the complexities of her existence. Rawlings coming down the escalator, was astonished to see her so cheerful and animated. He looked at the stout woman with respect.

"'Ere comes your dad," she said. Now let's 'ear what 'e's got to say about the fun and games up top."

Rawlings reported a lull. He thought they had better be pushing on while the going was good. Doreen stood up with alacrity. Home was tantalisingly near and her mother more desirable than any stranger, however kind.

"Thank you for the cake and looking after me," she said.

"There's pretty manners!" the stout woman said admiringly. "You're welcome, love. Any time your mum and dad wants to know you're somewhere safe, just you come along to me and I'll take care of you. I'm always 'ere — black-out to six o'clock. You can't miss me — I'm too big!"

Her chuckling laughter followed them up the stairs. Doreen waved till she was carried out of

sight. Then, for the time being, she forgot her. It was strange to be out of doors in London again, in the black-out, with a raid on. But everything seemed reassuringly quiet and people were walking about in quite an ordinary way. They hurried along and Doreen was glad of their haste because, apart from any other reason, she felt cold. Almost at once, it seemed, they had turned into Colefax Street from which Dakers Place led off. But there was something different about Colefax Street; the big warehouse which had loomed amongst the little shops and houses wasn't any longer there. Only its bones remained — giant girders which had withstood a conflagration. They looked vaguely menacing in the faint moonlight.

"Dad," she tugged at his arm, "the warehouse has gone. That's where Mum and I used to shelter, in the basement there."

"Burnt out," he said, with an appraising glance. "Must have been a big blaze."

He thought, with a sick qualm, that it was just as well they hadn't been sheltering there the night that happened, and again he wondered uneasily what he could say to his wife in explanation of his conduct. The trouble was, he couldn't explain it at all clearly to himself. He had acted on impulse, from motives which at the time had seemed unquestionable, but now their urgency had faded. He had taken a drop too much, that was the truth of it. But he couldn't very well give that as an excuse.

"Mum never told me," Doreen murmured. "She didn't want me to worry." It seemed to her that danger still threatened her mother, that by her discovery of it, it was happening all over again. "I'm glad now that Edie went away," she added.

"Who's Edie?"

"She's my friend. But she went to live in the country, like me."

And that's where you ought to be now, he thought gloomily.

They turned the corner by the paper-shop. Night was kind to the little cul-de-sac with its row of six tall houses facing a blank wall. Night concealed the broken steps and blistered paint, the dingy, unwashed curtains and the cracked fanlights above the doors. Familiar, it was dear and Doreen felt a yearning love for it. Behind one of those blacked-out windows, on the surface so unwelcoming was Mum.

The front door, as usual, was unlocked. Inside the narrow passage-way, the strange, remembered smell of home lay waiting for her — the smell of meals and faulty sanitation, damp walls, airlessness and washing hung to dry in a confined space. Eagerly she began to mount the stairs. For a moment Rawlings hesitated, then, fumbling in the dark, he followed her.

He did not know about the screen which hid the gas-stove on the landing. Doreen, avoiding it by instinct, did not warn him. It fell with a loud crash and Mrs. Rawlings flung open the door of her room.

CHAPTER XIV

At the sight of her mother, Doreen surprised herself by bursting into tears. They were tears of reaction and relief and the fierce pressure of her mother's arms about her increased them to almost a frenzy of weeping. In those first moments, Mrs. Rawlings spoke endearments and reassurances and nothing else. She did not seem even to observe her husband standing sheepishly in the background, and he made no attempt at speech. The light through the open

door cast shadows on the little landing with its sink and gas-stove and upturned screen, and he remained among those shadows and waited his turn. The house below them was very quiet. No one had been roused by the falling of the screen. Everyone had gone to the shelters.

Gradually, Doreen's sobs quietened until they were no more than gasping breaths. She twisted her head away from her mother's breast and looked behind her.

"Dad . . . Dad brought me, Mum. He took me in the train and I never had time to say good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. They don't know where I am. They'll be ever so worried, Mum."

"You'd better come in," Mrs. Rawlings said to her husband.

She took Doreen's arm and gave her a gentle push into the room, leaving him to follow them. There was a coal fire in the grate and the remains of a meal on the table. Warm, crowded and familiar, the room had never seemed dearer to Doreen. She wanted to stay there always, safe with Mum.

"You're cold, child — you're shivering. Go and sit by the fire and I'll mix you up some cocoa."

"I'm hungry too," Doreen said plaintively.

"There's bread and butter on the table there. Eat a bit of that to get on with."

Not until she had seen her seated in the armchair, with a plate on her lap, did she turn to her husband.

"And now let's hear what all this is about," she said.

He had slipped off his kit-bag and respirator and stood them in the corner by the door, but he had not sat down. Seeing him glance about him uncertainly, she pushed a chair towards him in wordless invitation, but she remained standing her-

self, mixing a jug of cocoa at the table. The atmosphere was brittle and Doreen stopped eating and for an instant saw again another room, in a house which she had long ago forgotten.

"Well, it was like this," he began. "I'm stationed at Frentham, see, and when I found out Doreen was so near, I thought I'd just drop over and have a look at her, like — make sure she was all right and happy and that."

"How did you know where she was?" Mrs. Rawlings interrupted.

"I came here, Christmas time," he said more slowly. "Someone told me about Doreen being evacuated and you going down to spend the Christmas with her. I took note of the address."

"I know who that was," she said angrily, stirring the cocoa mixture as though the spoon she wielded were a weapon aimed at the informer.

"I had a right to know," he countered defensively. "And man's got a right to know what's happened to his child."

"You've got no right," she stated, matter of factly, without rancour.

He was silent and she looked up sharply.

"Well — go on. You found out where she was and you went there. What happened then?"

He did not meet her eyes.

"I took exception." His voice dropped to a mumble. "It's not a suitable place for her. So I fetched her home."

"They wouldn't let you see her, I suppose."

"It wasn't that. Matter of fact, she was out when I called. It's not suitable, that's all. You made a big mistake when you sent her there, Ada."

"Oh Mum, you didn't!" Doreen burst out.

"You keep out of this, love," her mother said

gently. "Eat up your bread and butter and I'll warm your cocoa."

She went out on the landing, leaving the door open behind her, and they sat in silence listening to the sound of her pouring the cocoa into a saucepan and lighting the gas-ring.

"You can pick up this screen you knocked over," she called out.

He rose obediently and for a moment they remained outside together. It was the moment chosen by the Luftwaffe to send another flight of bombers over London. Far away, the first gun barked its warning and defiance.

"Mum!" Doreen cried in sudden panic.

She was back instantly.

"What is it, love?"

"Didn't you hear? They're coming back — the bombers."

"Don't you worry about them," Mrs. Rawlings said comfortably. "They're not looking for us."

"They burnt the warehouse, Mum. You never told me."

"Didn't I? I must have forgot."

Reassured by her tone, Doreen went on eating, though she listened anxiously to the gunfire, expecting any moment to hear bombs. Her father had remained on the landing and her mother returned there. She heard them talking in low voices, but she could not make out the words. She wished that her father would go and that she could be alone with her mother. But where would he go to? He would have to stay until the All Clear and that might not come before the morning.

Mrs. Rawlings came back with the cocoa steaming in a jug and her husband followed her, moving slowly, as though to conceal his lack of purpose. Deftly she relaid the table and opened a tin of salmon.

"Come and sit up at the table properly now," she said, "and eat a bit of fish with your cocoa. You too, Harry," she added.

She poured out a cup for herself, but she did not eat anything. They sat round the table in constrained silence. It was funny, Doreen thought, to be having a meal with Mum and Dad instead of with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. At breakfast, Mr. Osborne didn't talk either; he read the paper; but she and Mrs. Osborne talked. Or if Mrs. Osborne had letters to read, there was always Mac to talk to She wished Mac was here now."

"Mac nearly caught a rabbit," she said suddenly.

"Did he, love? When was that?"

"It was this morning," Doreen answered after a pause.

"This morning! Could it be really only this morning? Mr. Osborne had taken him out for a run after breakfast and she had gone too. He had barked like a crazy dog and Mr. Osborne had said: 'He's scented a rabbit.' Then they had seen the rabbit, skurrying for safety, with Mac a long way behind. He had come back afterwards, wagging his tail as though he expected to be praised, and Mr. Osborne had laughed and said: 'A little bit out of your class, old boy.'" Unconsciously, Doreen sighed.

"I'm going to put you to bed when you've finished your supper," her mother remarked. You're half asleep."

"In our bed — here?" she asked, startled.

"Where else would you go?"

"But — there's a raid on."

In confirmation of her words, the ear-splitting din of a mobile gun broke out, so it seemed, almost on their doorstep. Doreen started convulsively and flinched away from the sound. Rawlings jumped up from his chair and interposed his body between

her and the window. Through the muted reports of exploding shells they could hear the drumming of an enemy plane.

"Here, this is no place to stop," he protested. "We ought to get her downstairs, out of the way of the glass."

"There isn't any glass," Mrs. Rawlings said evenly. "Been no glass for three or four months. We'll go down in a minute. Mrs. Freeman's gone to the shelter, but I've got her key." She spoke very deliberately, as though by slowing her words she could slow the progress of events.

"Better not wait too long," he said jerkily. "Them guns aren't firing at the moon. It strikes me . . ."

He broke off as the accelerating whistle of a descending bomb blotted out all the other noises in the world. For the second time that day, Doreen felt herself seized up in his arms. She struggled and screamed in a delirium of fear.

"Mum! Mum! I want my Mum!"

Suddenly she was in darkness. They were outside on the landing and it was her mother's arms around her. Everything had happened so quickly that she scarcely heard the crash. The house dipped and quivered and the guns roared out again. Somebody was saying: "Oh my God. Oh my God." That was her father. But her mother's voice was in her ears, saying: "There, there, there. It's all over now, love. You're all right now. Mum's got you quite safe." She felt so tired that nothing seemed to matter very much.

The gun on the doorstep ceased firing and far away in the distance there was a dull reverberation.

"That's the third of the stick," her mother said. "He's gone now."

"I never heard the second," her father muttered doubtfully.

"You were making too much row yourself," she said tartly.

With no further exchange of words, they proceeded down the stairs. Past where the Sharps used to live and where strangers lived now; past the lavatory on the half-landing; past Mr. and Mrs. Goldstein and Miriam and Joe; down to the ground floor, where the blind man lived with his sister; down again to Mrs. Freeman's basement. The stairs creaked more than they used to; perhaps the bombs had loosened them; and there was more plaster off the walls; she could feel it loose under her fingers as she fumbled her way in the dark. Edie liked to pick the plaster off, but she got a scolding if Mrs. Sharp caught her at it.

It was cold in the basement and she knew that there were beetles, but tonight she was glad to be there. Mum switched on the light and poked the fire. It was nearly out, but not quite. She put a little coal on it and knelt on the hearthrug, drawing it up with a newspaper.

"Maybe we'll sleep down here tonight," she said. "I'll fetch some bedding by and by and make up the couch for you."

"Is that where you sleep sometimes?" Doreen asked.

"Sometimes I do."

"Do you think Mrs. Freeman would mind if I played with her cards? She always used to let me. They're on the mantelpiece."

"She won't mind. There you are—have a game with your father." She threw the pack on to the table.

"Do you know Beggar My Neighbour?" Doreen asked him.

"Did once. You can put me right if I've forgotten."

"I know a lot of card games now," Doreen said proudly. "I play with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. Sometimes I play with Lucy, but she's a bit silly and it's not much fun."

Mrs. Rawlings waited until the fire had burnt through and the game was in full swing, and then she went out unobtrusively and mounted the stairs to her room again. Only the distant guns were firing now. Through the window of the lavatory, which was still intact, she could see that fires had been started. There was one in particular — a big blaze.

Upstairs, she cleared the table and stacked the dishes in the sink, raked out the coals in the grate and collected blankets, pillows and her mending-bag from the bedroom. As an afterthought, she picked up her husband's kit and placed it outside on the landing. Then she locked both doors and made her way downstairs again. They barely looked up as she entered.

"Dad's winning," Doreen said.

"Seem to have the devil's own luck tonight," he apologised.

"I don't *mind* your winning," she reassured him. "Mr. Osborne nearly always wins. Mrs. Osborne says he cheats. But that's only a joke," she added hastily.

"When you've finished that game, it's the last," Mrs. Rawlings announced. "It's time you went to bed."

"It's finished now," Rawlings said. "Look, I've gone out. Sorry, Doreen. You owe me a hundred pounds."

"You'll have to wait till I've saved up," she giggled.

"Righto. Don't forget."

"You must sleep in your vest and knickers for once," Mrs. Rawlings said. "Hurry up now. I've made your bed up."

"Where are you going to sleep, Mum?"

"I'll take a nap in the arm-chair, by and by."

"It's a slippery old couch," Doreen yawned. "Suppose I fall off?"

"I'll tuck you up so's you won't. There, now. No more talking."

"Is Dad going to sleep here too?"

"I'll be packing up soon," he answered. "Soon as the raid's over. I'll get a bed at the Y.M.C.A. Will you give us a kiss now, Doreen?" He bent down over her.

"Good-night, Dad." She kissed him obediently and indifferently.

He would have liked to make her some apology, but he could not find the words.

For a little while Doreen watched the room through half-closed lids. Her father and mother sat opposite each other at the heavy round table, covered with a green serge cloth. He played aimlessly with the cards, shuffling them, dealing hands to himself and an imaginary partner, dividing them into suits; she opened her mending-bag and began to darn stockings which Doreen recognised as her own. It was very quiet in the room: the coals shifted and the clock on Mrs. Freeman's mantelpiece ticked lightly. There was no sound of the raid. Doreen's eyes grew tired of remaining even slightly open. They closed, and her breathing changed.

"She's asleep," Rawlings said in a low voice. "I'd better be packing."

"I thought you said you'd stop till the All Clear."

"I only said that for her. I'll take my chance, now it's quiet." He hesitated. "Unless you'd rather I stopped till it was over?"

"I don't mind being alone, if that's what you mean." She drew the wool across the darn without looking at him. "I'd like a word with you before you go, all the same. Now she's asleep. I'd like to know what really made you do it."

"Look, Ada, I was crazy, see. I told you upstairs — I said I was sorry. The truth was . . . well, I'd had a drop, and that was the truth of it. I got upset and had a drop too much."

"I knew that," she said scornfully. "You don't need to tell me that. But what I want to know is, why did you get upset? What made you say it wasn't suitable down there?"

He realised with surprise that she was not being entirely condemnatory and unsympathetic; she was genuinely anxious to hear his point of view. Encouraged, he spoke more naturally and less defensively.

"It wasn't anything you could put your finger on exactly. Just a lot of little things. You guessed right about them not letting me see her. I reckon that was right, though. I could understand their point of view. His — I never set eyes on her. He was responsible to you, he said. He spoke very nice about Doreen. They've got a nice place there. Too nice. That's the trouble, as I see it. Look, Ada, what's it going to seem like to her, coming back to *this,*" his gesture embraced the room, "after what she's had down there? She's a good kid, I know that, and she's properly wrapped up in you, but it's bound to unsettle her. You'd have done better to send her away to people in her own station, that's what I mean."

"She's happy there."

"That's true enough. And anywhere's better than stopping in London. I see that now all right. I've been in a proper sweat tonight, knowing it was

me that fetched her into it. It's only . . . Well, you may not believe me, but it was you I was thinking of, Ada. You've had all the work and worry of bringing her up and it don't seem fair, somehow, that these strangers should come along and make a pet of her and put all sorts of ideas into her head. They don't mean no harm, but it's just the way it is. You can see it already in the way she talks — Mr. Osborne this and Mrs. Osborne that. She's properly balmy about them. God knows I've got no right to interfere, but it don't seem fair to you, Ada."

"Oh, me — who cares about me?" she said dryly. But she was pleased with him. "It's her I worry about. She's got to live the life she was born to. The war won't last for ever, but I'll never be able to do much more for her than what I do now. She'll have to face up to that. It's the luck of the game — some get too much and most get not enough. That's how I see it."

"It ought to be changed," he said darkly. "There's big changes coming after this war."

"That's what you men always say. But you don't never do much about it, bar talk, talk, talk. Seeing's believing, that's my opinion. Meantime, the women have to go on scraping and scrimping the same as usual. Maybe it won't do Doreen so much harm as all that to live soft for a little while. She might not get the chance again."

"Well, it's up to you. I reckon I've butted in enough. I'll be pushing on now." He stood up.

This time she did not try to detain him.

"Your kit's upstairs on the landing. Here, take a box of matches. You don't know your way."

When he came back, he was surprised to find her turning over the cards. She gave a little laugh, almost girlish in its self-depreciation.

"I had my fortune told once, before I married

you. She kept bringing out the Jack of Diamonds. 'That's a fair man coming into your life,' she said. 'You ought to beware of him — he's no good to you.' But there — I didn't pay no attention."

"Pity you didn't," he muttered. "I've not been much good, have I?"

"Oh, I don't know. I dare say I wouldn't have married anyone if I hadn't married you. I've got Doreen. That's all I care about."

"I'd have liked another girl," he said wistfully. "I've got two boys now. They're fine kids, but I'd have liked a girl."

"You're never to go near Doreen again," she commanded, suddenly stern.

"I swear it."

"Well, if you do, I'll take steps, that's all. I could make things very awkward for you, you know that."

"You won't never need to. I won't try to see her again. It wouldn't be right."

He looked down at her. She slept uneasily, with a slight frown. If she dreamt, her dreams were worried ones.

"She enjoyed that game of cards," he said. "She's a good loser, anyway. Here, I'd like to leave her half a crown. Give it her from me, will you?"

He felt through his pockets, but the total only amounted to three or four shillings.

"Doesn't look as if I could," he said ruefully. "Well, that's that."

"I'll give her one and say it's from you, if you like," his wife offered.

"Would you? Thanks, Ada."

They regarded each other almost kindly. Self-conscious, he bent to pick up his kit.

"Well, I'll be getting along now. Good-bye, Ada. All the best."

"Good-bye, Harry. And gook luck."

After a moment's hesitation, they shook hands. He gave a nervous laugh.

"Here, I'm walking off with your box of matches."

"You can keep them."

"Well, they might help a bit in the black-out." He had reached the top of the basement steps. "Good-bye again," he called down.

"Good-bye."

She listened for a moment and heard the front door close behind him. The house seemed suddenly very empty.

Not long after, the raid started up again, but no bombs fell very near. Doreen slept on, undisturbed. In the chair before the fire, a blanket round her knees, Mrs. Rawlings waited for the All Clear. She thought about the Osbornes and felt rather sorry for them. A fine state of mind they must be in.

CHAPTER XV

Holding the door open for Francie to get into the taxi, Goeffrey said to the driver:

"Dakers Place, No. 5."

"Dakers Place? Don't know it." He seemed annoyed. His vanity was hurt.

"Well, I can't direct you to it, because I've never been there. It's W.I., if that's any help."

"Not much. I'll have to ask."

He jerked down the flag and Geoffrey got in beside Francie.

"Evidently not a taxi neighbourhood," he remarked.

She looked at him quite blankly, and it was obvious that she had not heard a word of the

exchange. He sighed and took her hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. She looked very white and had not eaten any breakfast and he was afraid that she might be going to be sick.

Driving west from Paddington, the taxi slowed down passing another and the driver leant out and shouted enquiries of his colleague. This incident was repeated twice before the information was obtained. Taxi-drivers always asked the way of one another, Geoffrey reflected; it was probably not etiquette to confess ignorance to an outsider, such as a policeman. He would have liked to point this out to Francie, to distract her thoughts, but the effort seemed too great.

Directions obtained, they proceeded faster, until turning out of one road they were confronted with a trestle barrier extended across the opening of another. Behind the barrier, a giant with a giant bag of grey dust had apparently emptied the contents all over the houses on either side. Tiles, glass and miscellaneous rubbish choked the surface of the road, and farther down, the inevitable gap, broken tooth in ruined mouth, showed where the bomb had landed. The taxi-driver put on his brakes and slid open the window behind his head.

"Have to make a detour," he announced.

Geoffrey nodded, looking straight ahead through the windscreen, deliberately avoiding meeting Francie's eyes. He wished that they had gone another way.

"I wonder where that fire was last night?" Francie said in a small voice.

"Down by the docks, I expect."

"Do you?" She was surprised. "I didn't think it was in that direction."

Nor was it, he agreed, but not aloud. Though, for the matter of that, Doreen might have spent the

night by the docks as well as anywhere else, and it was, of course, Doreen of whom she was thinking. In his own mind he felt perfectly sure that Doreen was secure and well, but he made no attempt to convey this certainty to Francie, because he was aware that it proceeded only from his lesser concern for the child. He did not know whether he ought to be ashamed of this or not. Was he abnormally detached or Francie abnormally involved? And if the latter, was it with Doreen as an individual, the affectionate, impressionable little girl who had fitted so smoothly into their household during the past six months, or with a symbol of childhood only, the representation of an idea? Long before Doreen had made her appearance, there had been a niche prepared for her. Would it have greatly mattered to Francie what image had been enthroned there? Sometimes he felt a kind of jealousy of Doreen, an emotion so impersonal that it brought with it no feeling of guilt and did not affect in any way his own fondness for her. He was not jealous for himself with Francie, but for the child he had not given her.

The taxi swung into the cul-de-sac of Dakers Place and pulled up with a jerk that seemed rather contemptuous. Surprised, Geoffrey fumbled in his pockets for change. Francie made no move. She was thinking that she knew now what it meant in the Bible: "My bones turned to water." Phrases from the Bible had run through her head very often in the last fifteen hours. She had prayed a great deal.

"We're here," Geoffrey said unnecessarily.

He held out his hand for her to alight. While the taxidriver turned his vehicle with some difficulty and unabated disapproval, they stood on the pavement outside the row of six tall houses and waited, as though his departure were the signal without

which they could progress no farther. Even when he had driven away they made no immediate move. They stood and looked at Dakers Place. But only Geoffrey saw it.

There were two ways in which you could react. For some people there is a particular sentiment about houses in decay; they easily imagine the generations they have sheltered and are sensitive to possible ghosts — the harmless anonymous shades of children, still alive perhaps but now grown old, and the dusty perfume of forgotten conflicts which lingers on in rooms so changed that the protagonists would no longer recognise them. For these people, Dakers Place would almost automatically conjure up the era of its prime, when the curved fanlights above the pilastered doorways held clean, unbroken glass and the steps from pavement to threshold dazzled with their purity. Behind the barred windows of the dingy basements, there had once bobbed the neat, capped heads of superior maidservants, who rustled when they walked in starched white aprons, who saw their own reflections in the highly-polished brass cans they had to carry up so many flights of stairs. Behind these walls, which only by chance could not boast the round blue plaque recording that here had lived or died an eminent Victorian, parties had been held at which young men with side-whiskers had sung feelingly to the accompaniment of ringleted young ladies. Calls had been made in carriages whose sweating horses had been backed — or had perhaps not need to be backed? The tall buildings blocking up two sides had not existed then; there might have been a strip of garden behind railings or a road cut through to Oxford Street. Here, once, life had been lived formally and at a slower pace. Here was matter for nostalgia for the past.

But to another kind of people, Dakers Place would suggest something entirely different. They would be reminded not of former gentility, but of present poverty. For poverty and the neighbourhood of poverty had smeared these six matched houses with the unmistakable tarnish of herd living. Those windows which retained their glass showed curtains which were tokens of surrender. No grace lingered in these walls and no one could be happier for existing within them. They afforded a refuge from the streets, easy access to employments of a certain kind, a nucleus round which to build the stubborn life of the heart; that was all. After the war, if they survived the bombs, it was likely that these houses would be pulled down; they had probably already been condemned. And to the casual passer-by, it might seem that the occupants must be condemned too — that behind this facade of dirt and neglect, only squalor and hopelessness and the subterfuges and contrivances of petty crime could still exist. That was how it seemed to Geoffrey, this March morning. And yet, he reminded himself, in one of these houses Mrs. Rawlings — perhaps a host of Mrs. Rawlings — aggressively maintained a quite considerable standard of honesty, cleanliness, manners and personal dignity. He had always rather liked her. He felt for her now a profound respect.

Francie observed nothing and drew no conclusions. She would not have been surprised if the taxi had set her down in Curzon Street. There was room in her mind for only one thought: Doreen was lost, and in a moment she would have to tell Doreen's mother.

"Rawlings — top floor," Geoffrey read out from one of the slips of paper pinned to the lintel of No. 5. "Well, here goes." Unconsciously he

sighed. There were few other places where he would not have preferred to be.

The house seemed very quiet; there was something almost sinister about its quiet. It did not occur to Geoffrey that at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning, after a night spent in the public shelters, most of its occupants would be still in bed. The quiet and the smell were the first things that struck him. He minded the smell very much. The flaking plaster on the walls, the worn, uncarpeted stairs were passively comfortless and depressing; but the peculiar, compound smell was actively repugnant. He wondered if it bothered Mrs. Rawlings or if she had long ago become too accustomed to it to notice. He wondered if Doreen minded it.

Passing the doors which hid the blind man and his sister, slowly and reluctantly they mounted the dark stairway — passing the first-floor rooms in which the friendly, exuberant Goldsteins lived, passing the lavatory on the half-landing, passing the second floor where Edie Sharp had spent her brief existence. Mrs. Rawlings' two rooms had once been servants' bedrooms and the stairs approaching them were narrower and steeper. From behind the screen there came the pleasant sound of frying. Mrs. Rawlings was cooking breakfast.

Francie had been leading the way, but now she stopped. It was as if she had walked, blindfold, into a wall, as if her apprehension had materialised into something concrete and insurmountable. She was too much of a coward after all, she told herself. Geoffrey would have to say it. The words she had so desperately rehearsed, had all gone from her. She saw in her mind's eye Mrs. Rawlings' face change from surprise to alarm, from incredulity to accusation. It was no use Geoffrey arguing that it

was not their fault. They had undertaken a responsibility and failed.

"What's the matter?" he asked anxiously.

Francie shook her head, leaning against the banisters as though she needed their support.

"I can't do it," she whispered. "I'm too frightened."

"You ought to have stayed behind at the hotel," he told her, irritable with concern. "I offered to come alone. Well, stay here now and I'll go on and knock . . ."

But at that moment, hearing their voices, Mrs. Rawlings looked round the screen. She did not smile in reassurance, because it did not occur to her to do so; she very rarely smiled; but she tried to make her voice sound kind and reassuring. She said:

"It's all right. She's here, with me."

Francie sat down on the stairs and dropped her face in her hands. Geoffrey thought that she was crying, but it was not tears which had defeated her. A wave of faintness, the backwash of her immeasurable relief, broke over her, buffeting her ears with a loud ringing noise, dissolving the ground beneath her feet. From a long way off she heard his voice and Mrs. Rawlings', explaining and commenting. Neither comment nor explanation held any interest for her. It was enough to know that Doreen was safe. She thought vaguely that it was silly to go trembling now, when everything was all right, but she could not help herself.

"Mrs. Osborne's upset," Mrs. Rawlings said compassionately. "It's given her quite a turn. I've got the kettle on — she'd like a cup of tea."

"Bear up, darling," Geoffrey urged her. Relief with him was light-hearted. "Mrs. Rawlings is going to make you some tea."

She stood up then, though the world was not

yet stable, and found herself a moment later sitting in an arm-chair in Mrs. Rawlings' living-room, menaced by the close proximity of Mrs. Rawlings' massive and abundant furniture. There was something dream-like in the sequence of events. The railway journey, the hotel, lying awake to watch the fire reflected in the sky, the taxi ride this morning and now this. None of it seemed quite real. It was almost as if Doreen were the reality, as if her presence gave substance and her absence withdrew it. But that was something which she could never say to Geoffrey. He would not understand, he would be hurt. It was something which she did not really understand herself.

"Doreen's still asleep," Mrs. Rawlings said, setting down a teacup beside her. "I took her to the basement last night and carried her up this morning without her waking. She'll wonder where she is for the minute, when she does wake up." She laughed. She seemed in surprisingly good spirits.

"You must be tired yourself," Geoffrey said sympathetically. "You had an unpleasant shock, and then the raid coming on top of it . . ."

"I didn't get much sleep," she owned, "but I'll make up tonight. It's funny how things work out, isn't it? Yesterday, I'd never have thought I'd be making Mrs. Osborne a cup of tea this morning." She looked at Francie in an almost friendly way and Francie summoned up a wan smile. "You'll have one too, sir?"

"No, thank you. I only breakfasted an hour ago."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll be getting on with breakfast for Doreen. It's time she roused."

She went out, closing the door behind her, and Geoffrey lit a cigarette and scrutinised the room, keenly interested in his surroundings and perfectly

cheerful again. Since Doreen was all right, he was free to think about other things.

"Do you suppose," he asked Francie, "that Mrs. Rawlings is typical of the tenants in this house or would you say that she was a cut above the average?"

"I don't know," Francie said faintly, not sharing his interest.

"I mean, to look at the street and to walk up these stairs, you'd expect to find God knows what—pickpockets, prostitutes, the sweepings of the police courts. It's a bloody disgrace that a woman like that should have to live in such conditions. Do you realise that we're in the wealthy borough of Westminster?" This was a purely rhetorical question and he did not pause for a reply. "It beats me that anyone has the heart to remain a respectable, law-abiding citizen in this environment. I'm pretty sure I shouldn't. We take advantage of the fundamental decency of ordinary people. We pay far too much attention to the misfits and the trouble-makers and not nearly enough to the patient, enduring majority. I'd like to have Mrs. Rawlings on a Housing Committee. I'd listen to anything she had to say with a great deal of respect."

"Geoffrey, do you think she'll let us take Doreen back with us this morning?"

"I expect so," he answered absently. "What rent do you suppose she pays for this place?"

"There's a train about midday. I shan't have a moment's peace of mind while she's still in London."

"Yes. I don't like to ask her, it would sound so impertinent. I mean, I should think it impertinent if she were to ask me what rent I paid. Having worthy motives isn't really an adequate excuse, I always feel. I should never make a good social worker, for that reason."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Francie said without apology. "I haven't been listening properly. Please ask her when she comes back when she thinks she'll have Doreen ready. She'll pay more attention to you."

"Yes. Yes, I will. Are you feeling better, darling?"

"A bit swimmy still, but all right really. I know now what blankets feel like when they've been put through the mangle — all limp and woolly. I just want to be home again."

"We ought to put through a call to the Crossleys. They're tethered to the house until we do. I'll 'phone directly we get back to the hotel."

"Listen!" Francie interrupted. "That's Doreen's voice." She smiled.

Mrs. Rawlings had been wrong in supposing that Doreen would wonder where she was. For so many years she had woken in the squat double bed that it was a moment or two before she remembered that there was anything unusual about the present occasion. Then it all came back, vividly, in sharp, clear pictures: her father waiting in the drive; the tea-shop; the train; fat woman in the Underground; the raid, and going to sleep downstairs on Mrs. Freeman's couch. But there no longer seemed anything alarming or even very exciting about these events. She could hear her mother moving around on the landing outside and in daylight, in the vast reassurance of that accustomed presence, everything appeared quite normal. Looking about her at the familiar room — the chest of drawers with the china trinket-box and her own photo as a baby, the rocking-chair which had belonged to a grandmother she had never known, the bulging curtain behind which hung her mother's clothes — already the tipsy, bewildering soldier and the subdued placatory man

who had played cards with her began to fade. There were things in life too curious to be real.

But Mr. and Mrs. Osborne were still real. She thought of them unhappily. She ought to get out of bed and find Mum and remind her about Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. They would be wondering what had become of her.

Before she had made up her mind to move, her mother came into the room, carrying her breakfast on a tray.

"You're spoilt this morning," she greeted her. "Besides, there's visitors in the other room."

"Visitors?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Osborne."

"Here!" Doreen sat up in bed, astonished and excited.

"They just arrived."

"How did they know I was here, Mum?"

"They didn't. They came to tell me what had happened. It's a case of all's well that ends well, so get on with your breakfast and think no more about it."

"Did they come all the way to London to find me?" Doreen marvelled.

"It was the right and proper thing to do. They're responsible for you, aren't they? But I'm sorry they've had the trouble and worry. Mrs. Osborne was quite upset and queer."

"Oh Mum, can I see her? Will you ask her to come and see me while I eat my breakfast?"

"You can see her when you're up and dressed, not before. They won't run away. I reckon they'll want to take you back with them."

Doreen was silent, troubled by conflicting emotions. She wanted to go back with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne, but she wanted to stay with her mother too. Her mother had become doubly precious to

her in the last twelve hours. Of course she would go back in a little while, because of school and the raids and because she lived with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne now, but not at once, not today. She hadn't hardly seen Mum at all. It would be nice to stay with her for a bit—just for a week, say. Unconsciously, she wanted to relax in the atmosphere of absolute security which Mrs. Rawlings radiated for her. Dearly as she loved the Osbornes, their attitude towards her, with its scrupulous regard for her importance as an individual, was subtly more fatiguing than her mother's downright yea and nay. Yesterday had been a step, reluctant and unhappy, towards growing up. Today she felt the need to be a child again—trustful, guarded, unweaned.

"Mum."

"Yes?" Mrs. Rawlings was tidying the room, making an excuse to stay with Doreen and leave her guests unattended for a little longer,

"Mum, do I have to go back today?"

"Don't you want to go back?"

"I'd rather stop with you, just for a little while—for a week. Could I, Mum?"

Mrs. Rawlings went on tidying, though her actions had become automatic. Doreen's words were very sweet to her, but it was not her temperament to show pleasure. She felt happy and triumphant, and at the same time she felt anxious and doubtful. She knew that she must not let herself be tempted to the child's despite. There had been a raid last night, there might be other raids, and this house was no place for Doreen. But there were other places. Surely, after six months of loneliness, the fates would not grudge her one week?

"What do you want to stay for?" she asked. "You're happy enough there, aren't you?" She knew the answer but she ached to hear it said.

"It isn't that I don't want to go back with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne — it's just that I want to be with you, Mum. Will they mind? Did I ought to go back with them when they've come all that way to find out where I was?" She sounded anxious.

"They'll understand, I reckon." It was tacit consent, and they both knew it. "Who's going to tell them — you or me?"

Doreen considered the point. Her almost morbid fear of appearing ungrateful made her feel she ought to do her own explaining, but on the other hand, the instinct which prompted her to remain with her mother, her longing to be bidden and protected, shrank from responsibility.

"You tell them, Mum." She was a little shamefaced about it. "But I want to see them before they go," she added hastily. "Promise you won't let them go before I've seen them!"

"Well, hurry up with your breakfast, then. They won't want to hang about all day."

Privately, Mrs. Rawlings thought that they would be quite well pleased. It tied you, having a child to look after, you couldn't deny that. A week off for them and a week off for her — maybe Harry hadn't done so badly, in the long run. Not that she'd ever let him know she thought so. The reflection made her smile to herself, a smile that was oddly indulgent, almost tender.

Yet the Osbornes, when she told them, did not look pleased: taken aback, but not pleased. It occurred to Mrs. Rawlings then that they might be feeling rather affronted. After all, as she was the first to own, they had been put to a lot of expense and anxiety. She had worded it as nicely as she could, not to make Doreen sound ungrateful — or her either, for the matter of that. The last thing she wanted was for them to take offence and wash

their hands of the whole arrangement. But it stood to reason, didn't it, that Doreen would want to stop with her a bit, after the fright she'd had? It was only natural. They'd think it natural, right enough, if the boot was on the other leg and Doreen was their child.

"But the raids . . ." Francie said. Her voice faltered.

Mrs. Rawlings forgot her mounting indignation and softened towards her again. It was right that people from the country should show concern about the raids on London. They mostly seemed to take them far too casually.

"I've thought of that, M'am," she said reassuringly. "There's a basement at the office, where the fire-watchers sleep. It wouldn't do for always, it wouldn't be allowed, but I could get permission for a few nights, like. They've got camp-beds and all. It's a safe building, steel and concrete. I could do my cleaning early, before Doreen woke up, and take her home with me at nine o'clock." There was pride in her voice. She had thought quickly and constructively.

"Sounds quite a good scheme," Geoffrey murmured, filling in a pause. But he was looking at Francie, not at Mrs. Rawlings. "What would you do about getting her back to us at the end of the week?" he asked, when it was evident that Francie was not going to comment.

"If I put her in the train, the guard could keep an eye on her, couldn't he, sir? She's not a baby now. She'd be all right."

A faint resentment came into her voice. Francie's continued silence seemed to her a criticism. If she, Doreen's own mother, was satisfied, what business had another woman to be doubtful? Jealousy and suspicion, never very far below the surface

of her mind, twitched into life. Although it was to Geoffrey whom she spoke, she, too, was watching Francie, and her regard was almost challenging.

Francie let the challenge lie. There was nothing else she could do. She accepted the fact, with all its bitterness. Doreen was Mrs. Rawlings' child, not hers. If Mrs. Rawlings chose, Doreen must stay in London, for a week, for ever. And it appeared that Doreen herself wanted to stay. It was stupid to mind that — stupid and irrational and grudging. But she did mind. You minded things with your heart even when your head told you that you had no right or justification. That was part of loving someone, the humiliating coin in which you had to pay, the base coin which purchased nothing. For there was no ownership in love, no real ownership, even for Mrs. Rawlings. But just now, for the time being, Mrs. Rawlings held the tokens of authority.

"If you'll let us know which train, we'll meet it," she said in a low voice. It was surrender.

Mrs. Rawlings relaxed.

"Doreen made me promise you'd not go without her seeing you," she remarked amiably. "I told her not till she was up and dressed, but if you're in a hurry . . ."

Geoffrey looked at his watch.

"We've got to telephone and settle at the hotel. We haven't too much time."

"Then maybe you'd not mind going in to her now. She'd be ever so disappointed to miss you."

It seemed to Doreen a long while since her mother had left her to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Osborne. It gave her a strange feeling to think of them being in the next room, a feeling almost of uneasiness. She had never encountered them except against

their own background and she expected them to be somehow different away from it. She felt different herself, self-conscious and even shy, as if there were two Doreens, one who lived at home with Mum and another who lived in the country with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne, and only embarrassment and misunderstanding could result from their temporary fusion. Yet it was not entirely that, either. Mum was London and Mr. and Mrs. Osborne were the country, but it had seemed quite natural to have Mum come down for Christmas — she had not felt embarrassed then. It was really only having Mr. and Mrs. Osborne here that she found disconcerting. She did not know why, but it was so. She wished that she had not had to sleep in her vest and knickers — it looked silly. She ate her breakfast quickly and lay down under the bed-clothes again to conceal her silly appearance.

But when the expected knock came at the door she forgot her self-consciousness and sat up to greet them, excited and moved. They were dear and welcome and they brought with them their own atmosphere, so that she was no longer aware of any difference between here and there. Filled with love towards them, she could not cease smiling, as if by smiling she could convey emotion which was beyond her powers of speech. She held Francie's hand, pulling her down to sit on the edge of the bed, and looking from her to Geoffrey, who was leaning over the rail at the foot, loved them both with smiling eyes.

"Well, this is a nice time to be still in bed," Geoffrey said.

"I only just woke up," she defended herself. "I went to sleep at Mrs. Freeman's, in the basement, and woke up here. There was a raid last night. Did you know?"

"We heard it," Francie said. "We were here last night too."

"Did you come after me directly, then?"

"By the next train."

"I tried not to go away," Doreen pleaded. "I told him you'd give him a cup of tea, but he wouldn't listen. So then we went to Mrs. Hennessey's for tea and after that the train came in and he lifted me up and the door slammed and the train went off and I couldn't get out." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't worry about it now, darling," Francie said. "It's all over and done with now."

"He was sorry after," Doreen felt impelled to say. "We played Beggar My Neighbour. But he won't come again, will he?"

"We'll keep you on a lead another time," Geoffrey promised lightly. "Like Mac."

"Poor old Mac! He'll miss me, won't he? He won't know I'm coming back quite soon." She watched them anxiously, dreading their disappointment or displeasure.

"We'll all miss you," Francie said.

"It's only for one week. I just thought . . . I just thought I'd like to stop with Mum for a bit." Her eyes beseeched them to understand.

"Of course you did," Francie said gently.

Doreen's expression lightened. "Will you come and fetch me?" she asked.

"Your mother's going to put you in the train and we're going to meet you the other end," Geoffrey replied.

"Shall I have to change?"

He burst out laughing.

"Don't be such an old fuss-pot! You would trust your guardian angel to put you on the right road, would you? I never knew a girl so full of doubts and queries."

"Don't tease her," Francie chided him.

"Why not?" He grinned at Doreen. "Can't you be teased in London?"

"Oh yes! I don't mind being teased anywhere," she boasted.

He looked at his watch.

"We ought to be leaving. Better start saying good-bye."

He moved away from the foot of the bed and ruffled her hair in passing.

"Good-bye, Mr. Osborne," she said obediently.

"Good-bye, Doreen. Behave well and do me credit."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Osborne." She put her arms round Francie's neck and hugged her.

"Good-bye, darling. Take care of yourself."

"Will you give my love to Lucy and Mrs. Warman and Anne and Betty and Mrs. Renshawe and everybody?"

"By the time we've worked through that lot, you'll be back yourself," Geoffrey assured her. He opened the door and touched Francie's arm. "Come on. We've run this rather fine."

Outside on the landing, Mrs. Rawlings was waiting with a list of things for Doreen which she asked to have posted. Nothing further was said on either side. They shook hands and the Osbornes started down the stairs.

Half-way down, Francie said in a low voice:

"She didn't seem to have been frightened by the raid, did she?"

But Geoffrey was holding his breath and he did not reply.

"ALL by yourself? Nobody to play with?" Mrs. Freeman enquired sympathetically.

She stood in the hall, looking up at Doreen on the floor above. It was the first time they had met alone, without Mrs. Rawlings as a third, since Doreen's return to the house.

"Mum's working," Doreen told her. "She wouldn't take me. It's raining and I've got a cold."

"Hanging about them draughty stairs won't do your cold no good. You come along with me. I put the kettle on before I slipped out—I'll give you a cup of tea and some biscuits I've got put by."

Doreen hesitated but only for a moment. She knew that her mother had taken for granted that she would remain in their own rooms, but she was lonely and rather bored and tea with Mrs. Freeman would be a change. After all, although her mother criticised Mrs. Freeman, she was on more friendly terms with her than with anyone else in the house. Doreen had been a frequent visitor to the basement in the old days.

"You might catch my cold. Don't you mind?" she warned her.

"I'm too old to catch colds. You come along down."

It was strange to recollect that the last time she had been in Mrs. Freeman's room, her father had been there also. Mrs. Freeman didn't know that and she must be very careful not to let it out. For Mrs. Rawlings had decided that there was no need for any of the neighbours to be told that Doreen had been brought home by her father. None of

them had seen him and she still hoped that few of them even realised that he existed. She could not be sure of it, because Mrs. Freeman had probably talked after his visit at Christmas. She would have liked to give the old woman a piece of her mind about that — letting him have the Osbornes' address and then concealing the fact that she had done so — but it would rouse her curiosity afresh. As it was, she would not dare to ask any questions for fear of betraying her own duplicity. As far as she or anyone else need know, the Osbornes had brought Doreen home themselves, for their own personal reasons. It was only important to make it quite clear that these in no way reflected on Doreen.

"But what will I *say* if people ask me?" Doreen had argued unhappily. She had no faith in her power to lie convincingly.

"Just tell them that Mr. and Mrs. Osborne had to go away for a week and they hadn't nobody to leave you with, so they fetched you back to me."

"But suppose somebody saw them when they came? Without me?"

"What if they did? They'd just come round to make sure you was all right after the raid. What's wrong with that?"

Doreen had found no further argument, but she had felt, nevertheless, that there *was* something wrong. It was wicked to tell lies, her mother taught. She had also said, however, that them as asked nosey questions shouldn't expect the truth.

Now, remembering that first night, Doreen glanced round instinctively to find the playing-cards. They were still on the end of the mantelpiece. Mrs. Freeman didn't know that they had used her cards to play with. She felt a little guilty towards Mrs. Freeman.

"Looking to see if the cards are still there?"

Mrs. Freeman chuckled, with what seemed to Doreen uncanny and alarming prescience. "You always liked to play with them, didn't you? Well, you shall have them again when you've ate your tea. Pull up your chair. I'll only be able to give you the one cup. I'm short of milk today."

"We get as much milk as we like in the country," Doreen remarked, glad to change the subject.

"That's what's done you the good, then. You look a lot less peeky than what you did, cold or no cold. You like it down there, don't you?"

"Yes, thank you."

She did not sound very enthusiastic, because she was becoming rather tired of answering this particular question. At first she had tried to enlarge on her reply but no one listened, she had found—they weren't really interested. Mrs. Freeman was curious, which was different from being interested. She was a small, plump old woman with pretty white hair and bright, inquisitive eyes in her soft, puffy face. Compared with some of the other tenants, she was well-to-do, living on her pension and an allowance from her married son. She was clean and she was respectable, both qualities of which Mrs. Rawlings approved. She hated her daughter-in-law, and rather than live with her preferred the risk of being bombed. Her world was narrow and, in consequence, important to her.

"But you're glad to be home with your ma, eh?" she suggested. "No place like home, that's what they say. Your ma misses you. She don't say so but it's plain to see. She's a good mother to you and no doubt you'll prove a good daughter to her when your time comes to be out in the world and earning. Your ma's worked very hard for you. It isn't always easy, having to be mother and father both."

Her voice was innocent, but she glanced at Doreen sharply as she spoke the last words. Doreen, however, was looking at the biscuit on her plate. She did not reply. To her surprise, she felt no awkwardness but only a secret amusement. It was the first adult amusement she had experienced and it gave her a gratifying sensation of power. A sly, inquisitive but harmless old woman had made a sly, inquisitive but harmless remark. There was an artistic rightness about it which pleased Doreen, even though she could not analyse her pleasure.

"I'm going to make a lot of money when I'm grown up," she boasted placidly, "I'll live with Mum in the country. It's nicer than London. Did you ever live in the country, Mrs. Freeman?"

Unwittingly side-tracked, Mrs. Freeman was ready enough to reminisce.

"I never come to London till after I was married. Born and bred in Devonshire, I was. That's the prettiest county in England. And that's where the prettiest girls come from, my husband used to say." Her laugh was still coquettish, the same laugh with which she had accompanied the remark for fifty-old years.

"Edie's gone to Devonshire," Doreen said.

"Edie who?"

"Why, Edie Sharp. *You* know. She used to live up on the second."

"But that was the poor little girl that got killed," Mrs. Freeman said in a puzzled voice. "You can't be meaning her." Then, seeing the look on Doreen's face, her own changed. "For mercy's sake, have I said what I shouldn't have? Didn't your ma tell you about Edie?"

Very pale and quite speechless, Doreen shook her head. Her mouth had gone completely dry and her heart thudded.

"She got killed by shrapnel, going to the shelter. I'd told Mr. Sharp he didn't ought to take her while the guns were letting off. There was quite a crowd at the funeral and some lovely wreaths. The others that used the shelter collected for one and the Goldsteins sent one and your ma and me sent one together. She put your name on it too. I can't get over her not telling you. I'd never have breathed a word if she'd given me the hint."

Mrs. Freeman was genuinely distressed, though in a minute or two she would be climbing the stairs to share her emotion with Mrs. Goldstein.

"When did it happen?" Doreen whispered, swallowing.

"Week before Christmas week. I'll never forget it. Nobody hadn't the heart to celebrate, even if it'd been an ordinary Christmas. Your ma went down to be with you, didn't she? She didn't want to spoil your Christmas by telling you, that's what it was."

Doreen was thinking that she knew now why Edie had never returned her Christmas-card. All this time she had owned Edie an apology. It seemed to her that she had been disloyal to Edie in even believing her mother's story. She ought to have known that Edie would have sent a card back.

"I think I'll go now, Mrs. Freeman," she said politely. "Thank you for the tea."

"Don't you want to stop and play with the cards?" Mrs. Freeman asked, disappointed of her company.

"No, thank you. Not just now."

She slipped off her chair and walked to the foot of the stairs, keeping her head averted.

"Well, come down another day. I don't like to think of you up there all on your own.

But this time Doreen did not answer. To be on her own was what she most desired.

Coming along the passage which led into the hall, she had a sudden urgent impulse to open the front door and go out into the street. The house was hateful to her all at once, oppressive and imprisoning. It was dark and stuffy and ugly — too many people had lived in it. But even as she hesitated, she knew that she could not really go outside. With a cold, in the rain, without her coat? Turning away, she stared at the doors, one behind the other, where the blind man lived with his sister. The blind man had gone away when the raids began; he had been evacuated to a home in the country. Now his sister had a friend to live with her, a woman she knew at work. Mrs. Freeman said that she liked it better, that she hoped her brother wouldn't ever come back. He was a tie — he grumbled. Inwardly Doreen had sympathised with her, because she had not liked the blind man either. He never smiled or spoke to her — he felt his way stealthily with his white stick and sometimes stood quite still and listened, with an angry and suspicious look. Peering through the banisters at him, Edie and she had waited with beating hearts until he had moved on. It had been a game, but a rather frightening one. Edie would give her a little poke and make a grimace of mingled amusement and fear. Edie would have been glad, too, that he had gone away. Suddenly her own sight blurred. Tears brimming over, her mouth contorted, she ran up the stairs to sanctuary. She would never, never see Edie again.

Back in her own room she did not cry for long: it seemed rather futile, such a long while after. There was another reason also. Edie dead was not the same as Edie living; she was a different person. Being dead, she had become invested with something of the awe and mystery of death itself — a condition about which Doreen had not yet analysed her

feelings. She had been acquainted with people who had died, but they had been old or sickly and for none of them had she cared particularly. Unconsciously, she felt the incongruity of tragedy allied with Edie, ennobling and disguising a noisy, rather foolish, tough little girl who had scuffled and squealed in the playground and the shelter, who had argued good-temperedly over games and whose complete lack of imagination had made her the most soothing companion in the world. Now, Doreen would never be able to remember her as she had really been. The shadow which had lain ahead of her fell retrospectively and falsified her past. She was no longer just Edie, but Edie-who-was-killed. She was a child whom Doreen had not really known at all.

Depressed, bored and lonely, Doreen wondered what to do with herself between now and her mother's return. She crossed to the window, but the white cloth which acted as a substitute for glass was opaque and she could not see out. If she went out on the landing and opened the other door, she could go into the bedroom, but it would be just the same there. If she went down the stairs she would pass many doors, but they were not doors by which she could enter. They led into other people's lives and she would be intruding there. She had only the right to these two rooms at the top of the tall house and the strip of space uniting them. Once more, her life had narrowed to these confines.

Lying on the table was the brown paper which had been wrapped round the clothes which Mrs. Osborne had posted to her. They had arrived that morning. Doreen had hoped that there would be a letter with them, but there had not been. She imagined Mrs. Osborne doing up the parcel — she would fetch the brown paper from the kitchen

cupboard and the string from the drawer in the hall. She would tie the string rather clumsily, because she was not very good at making knots. Mr. Osborne must have taken the parcel to the office with him — it had the Wychmore postmark. It seemed to have travelled from another world.

On Sunday she would be going back into that world. She tried to put the thought away from her, as though it were forbidden and disgraceful. But it was not the thought itself of which she was ashamed ; she was ashamed because it came accompanied by a feeling of relief. She wanted to go back. Even though it meant leaving Mum, she wanted to go back.

When, at five o'clock, Mrs. Rawlings returned from her afternoon job, she was surprised and secretly pleased to be greeted by Doreen with a demonstrative fervour which she rarely showed and which her mother never invited. It did not occur to her that the fervour was inspired by guilt. It did not occur to Doreen either. She only knew that her mother had got wet and looked tired and that she loved her very much. She put on the kettle for tea and hovered round her solicitously. Somewhere at the back of her mind was the thought of Edie and the knowledge that her mother had lied to her about Edie, but she was not going to remember that now.

"If your cold's better," Mrs. Rawlings said, "you shall have a treat on Saturday. I'll take you to the Zoo. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Oh Mum, will you? I've never been to the Zoo." Already in her mind she was boasting of the visit to her schoolfellows.

"I'd like to give you a nice treat before you go back. It's been a bit dull for you, hanging about while I get through my work, with no one to play with."

They were both thinking of Edie at that moment, but neither of them mentioned her.

"I haven't been dull, Mum," Doreen assured her loyally. "Except today. And then Mrs. Freeman asked me down and gave me a cup of tea." Instinctively, she knew that it was better for her to mention it before Mrs. Freeman did.

"You didn't say nothing about — you know?"

Doreen shook her head.

"She's such an old gossip," Mrs. Rawlings murmured. "I'm sorry now I ever agreed to sleep down there from time to time. It was for her sake as much as mine. She didn't fancy going to the shelter, and I don't know as I blame her for that, either."

"Will you go on sleeping at the office when I've gone back?" Doreen asked.

"Not me. Not with all them silly, larky fire-watchers all over the place. It wouldn't be allowed, neither."

"Mum . . ."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Nothing. I've forgot what I was going to say. Will there be elephants at the Zoo?" It was no use. She would never be able to speak of Edie now.

"Unless they've moved them out of London. There always used to be."

"Can I have a ride on an elephant? Is it expensive?"

"I'll give you some spending money. For monkey-nuts and that. As a matter of fact, somebody gave me half-a-crown to give you, and you might as well have it now as later." She opened her purse.

"Was it Mr. Osborne?" Doreen asked smiling. She was quite certain that it was.

"No it wasn't your precious Mr. Osborne. It was your father, if you want to know."

She held out the coin and Doreen took it

almost gingerly, so much surprised that the coin itself seemed unauthentic too.

"Dad gave it to me? When? Has he been again?"

"He gave it to me Saturday night, after you'd gone to sleep. It was his way of saying he was sorry, I reckon. He'd want you to spend it on a treat."

"Do I have to write and thank him?" Doreen enquired, troubled.

"No, you don't," Mrs. Rawlings said shortly. "There's going to be no more truck between him and you, that's something I've made quite clear. You don't have to worry that you'll be seeing him again. You can put him right out of your mind."

Doreen felt relieved, although she did not believe that she would ever be able to put him entirely out of her mind. Yet mingled with her relief, there was a slight tinge of disappointment. Towards the end of the short while they had spent together, she had ceased to feel afraid of him and now she was touched by his gift of the half-crown. He was too shadowy, too unpredictable a figure to be missed or much regretted, but for the first time in her life she wished that she had an ordinary father, like other children had, and was sorry that her own should be so different.

The morning after this conversation, Mrs. Rawlings overslept and was late in finishing her cleaning. Doreen was helping her, dusting the furniture and re-arranging the desk fittings in neat patterns of her own invention, when the door opened and Helen came in. She seemed rather taken aback at the sight of Doreen, and Doreen stopped dusting immediately and looked at her nervously and almost guiltily.

"Hullo, Doreen," Helen greeted her. "Helping your mother?" Her tone was exaggeratedly hearty. She was aware of its falsity, but she could do nothing about it.

"Yes, Miss Osborne." Doreen did not consciously dislike Helen, but in her presence she at once became colourless and unforthcoming.

"You sleep here now, in the store-room, don't you?" Helen continued. "Do you like it? Is it fun?"

"It's a bit stuffy," Doreen answered truthfully. "It's fun in a way. I like helping Mum in the mornings," she volunteered.

"What do you do with yourself for the rest of the day?" Helen took off her hat and coat and began to look through the bundle of mail she had collected from the hall porter.

"Sometimes I go with Mum when she goes to clean Miss Andrews' flat and sometimes I stay at home. On Saturday Mum's taking me to the Zoo."

"That will be lovely," Helen murmured, as bored and conscientious as Doreen herself.

There was a short silence. Doreen wished that her mother, who was across the corridor, cleaning the washrooms, would reappear and rescue her; she felt that it would be rude just to walk away and leave Miss Osborne. Helen, slitting open envelopes, hoped that the child would take the hint and go. But the sight of the letters had suggested something to Doreen.

"Miss Osborne . . ." Her voice was uncertain and a little breathless.

"Yes?" Helen glanced up, surprised at the pause.

"Did you have a letter from Mrs. Osborne? I mean, since I came to London?"

"I had one yesterday. They were both quite well. Is that what you wanted to know?"

Doreen wanted to know if it had mentioned her, if Mrs. Osborne had said that they missed her, but she could not put this into words. Miss Osborne would think she was silly.

"That's what I meant," she agreed rather lamely.

"You'll be going back soon, won't you?"

"On Sunday."

It was on the tip of Helen's tongue to ask her if she wanted to go back, but she decided that this was an injudicious question, whatever the reply, and she said nothing. At that moment Mrs. Rawlings came into the room and their mutual embarrassment was ended.

It was the first time Helen had seen Mrs. Rawlings since Doreen's return and she was struck by the change in her. The woman had come alive. Knowing and liking her better than Geoffrey and Francie did, knowing and liking Doreen less, she felt that it was the greatest pity in the world that mother and child were to be separated again. And not only for Mrs. Rawlings' sake — for Francie's too. Francie's letters telling her what had happened had seemed to her exaggeratedly concerned. It was obvious that she was terrified of the raids on Doreen's account and she had begged Helen to make sure every morning that she was still safe. Nobody wanted a child to be exposed to danger, but Helen argued that this was primarily Mrs. Rawlings' business, and that she should be trusted to take every care of her own offspring. It irked her to feel that her sister-in-law was making a fool of herself. There was something rather unseemly, she thought, in minding so much about other people's children; it was a little like weeping in a public place; and the longer Francie kept Doreen, the more she was going to feel the eventual, inevitable parting with her.

Mrs. Rawlings sensed Helen's attitude towards her; she smiled at her, suddenly liking her very much.

"Reckon I might as well do the cleaning night times while I'm sleeping down below and have a nice lay-in mornings," she joked.

Doreen sneezed, and she glanced at her with fond exasperation.

"Don't you never have no children, Miss Osborne — they're a lot more trouble than they're worth."

Inwardly, Helen concurred. She thought that Doreen, poor little wretch, had been the cause of quite a lot of trouble and that she looked like causing more before this incident was closed.

CHAPTER XVII

Doreen's cold, which had seemed better by Saturday, when she went with her mother to the Zoo, was very heavy again by the time she arrived back with the Osbornes on Sunday. She had travelled in a draught, lacking the assurance to ask anyone to close the window, and Francie, who met her train, was distressed by the appearance she presented. Her torrent of words, mostly about the visit to the Zoo, was continually interrupted by fits of coughing. Francie put her straight to bed and took her temperature. It was up three degrees.

"That's not much of a temperature for a child," Geoffrey reassured her.

Francie shook down the thermometer with a vicious flick of her wrist.

"This is the result of sleep in basements," she said crossly. "It's the sort of thing I expected, but it's very annoying, all the same."

Doreen did not feel particularly ill — only rather hot and thirsty. She was very pleased to be

in her own bed again, in her own room. She lay propped up on extra pillows and smiled at everything that was said to her. Already, it seemed that she had never been away. She luxuriated in her invalid s importance and received like a chatelaine an account of all that had occurred during her absence.

"And Mac killed a rat down by the stream," Francie concluded, "and Mrs. Warman's ginger puss had kittens, and Jim Sadler's home on leave."

"When my cold's better I'll go and see the kittens," Doreen promised herself. "Are they ginger too?"

"All sorts, I believe. You can ask Lucy in the morning."

"I love kittens," Doreen murmured drowsily.

"Would you like one? I expect Mrs. Warman would give you one, if you asked her."

"Could I? Oh, could I?" She sat up, drowsy no longer.

"If you're a good girl and lie still and don't make your cold worse. I'm going to leave you to sleep now. If you want me in the night, tap on the wall and I'll come in."

"That's what you said the first night I came," Doreen reminded her. "But I never did. I don't expect I will tonight, either. I expect I'll just sleep. This is a nice bed for sleeping in." She drew a deep breath of contentment. The store-room at the office seemed immeasurably remote.

But although Doreen did not tap on the wall, Francie several times came in to see her during the night. Her cough kept them both awake. None of the remedies in the medicine-chest seemed to alleviate it. Exhausted by its spasms, she would lie back in Francie's arms, forgetting that she mustn't let Mrs. Osborne catch her cold, and rest her head

against her breasts. Francie's silk dressing-gown was cool and soothing to her hot cheeks. It was a nuisance that she had a cough, but she did not feel unhappy. In the morning, Mrs. Osborne said, she would find something to make it better. Meanwhile, they talked about the kittens and which colour one Doreen would choose. She would have to wait a little while until it was old enough to leave its mother. How was Mac going to behave towards it? Would he be jealous or not?

Doreen slept more than Francie did, but her temperature was still as high in the morning.

"We'll have to call in Jones," Geoffrey said at breakfast. "I'll drop in and see him on my way to the office. If we don't do something about curing the child's cough, you'll soon be a wreck yourself. You can't be up with her every night."

"You don't think she's going to be really ill, do you?" Francie asked anxiously.

"Of course not."

Jones, a young man awaiting call-up, drove over from Wychmore in the afternoon. He diagnosed a chill affecting the bronchial tubes; warmth and a liquid diet would soon put the child right. He told Francie that he would leave a prescription with the chemist at Wychmore and her husband could pick up the medicine on his way home. He expected that the temperature would be lower in the morning. Perhaps she would telephone to let him know? It was difficult to fit in all his calls these days.

"You're terribly busy, I know," Francie murmured, with the rather hypocritical sympathy of patients towards overworked doctors. "It's only, one feels so responsible about someone else's child."

"Of course — she's an evacuee, isn't she? One of the lucky ones. They don't all get as much

care and attention, I can promise you. I haven't seen your husband on the golf course lately?"

Francie said no, he hadn't played for some while.

Refusing to play golf was one of Geoffrey's war symptoms. He could no longer reconcile himself to taking air and exercises in that form. Working in the garden, he was growing food, taking Doreen for walks, he was (presumably) forwarding the health and education of the rising generation. Although Francie never made the mistake of saying so, she had noted with relief that Geoffrey's dark moods had been to a great extent dispelled since Doreen's arrival in the household. Conscientious herself, she had no qualms about overriding the scruples of the people whom she loved if it seemed to her that these in any way incommoded them. She did not think that Geoffrey could do any more than he was doing about the war, and if giving hospitality to a London child could make him feel any better about it, it was one more reason for welcoming her presence.

Certainly he had been rather gloomy again during the past week. But Francie was too honest to pretend that this was due to his war conscience. She knew that he had been hurt by her attitude towards him over Doreen's disappearance. For the first time in their lives she had been angry with him, and although they had been reconciled since, he had not yet been able to dismiss the matter from his mind. Francie could not dismiss it from her own mind either. It was not that she any longer felt indignant with him — what worried her was that a situation had arisen in which she ever had done so. In the pattern of life they jointly wove, there was a patch now where the threads had snarled. They could not go back and unravel it. There was nothing to be done but to continue, leaving the blemish

behind, hoping it would be unnoticed and forgotten in the whole.

Geoffrey came home early from the office. Although Mac barked, Francie did not appear to greet him. She was in Doreen's room, Lucy said; she had been there most of the day. Lucy herself, preparing dinner single-handed, was flustered and uncommunicative. Geoffrey went upstairs and listened outside Doreen's door. He could hear nothing and he knocked very gently.

After a moment, Francie opened the door and, motioning him not to speak, joined him outside. He followed her into their bedroom.

"How is she? I've got the medicine."

"She's asleep at the moment. She's been very drowsy all day. At first I read to her, but for the last few hours she hasn't seemed able to concentrate enough even to listen. Once, when she woke up, she didn't seem to know me for a minute. I haven't taken her temperature since midday, but I'm sure it's higher."

"This stuff'll bring it down," Geoffrey said with more assurance than he felt. "You'd better give her a dose next time she rouses. She hasn't come out in a rash or anything, has she?"

"No, I don't think it's anything infectious. Jones didn't either."

They looked at each other rather helplessly. This was something new in their experience. But behind Francie's concern, Geoffrey thought he detected a curious contentment. She looked — he fumbled for the word — fulfilled. Together with the worry and the inconvenience there was, apparently, some kind of compensation. It pleased her to nurse Doreen when she was ill.

"What's going to happen tonight?" he asked.

"I shall have to sit up with her. She might

get lightheaded and start throwing of the bed-clothes."

"In that case, I'd better move into the spare-room and Doreen can have my bed. You'll at least get some sleep when she does, if you can lie down. I'll help you change the sheets and carry her in."

"Thank you, darling. Ask Lucy to put some kettles on for hot-water-bottles, will you?"

The world of kittens and playing in the garden had retreated a long way from Doreen in the past twenty-four hours. Even her own dear bed had betrayed her and was no longer cool and soft but burning hot and full of rucks. For a moment Mrs. Osborne's hand on her forehead was pleasant and quietening, but in another moment it became a burden and constriction and she turned her head restlessly to shake it off. But she drank the beastly-tasting medicine from a long habit of obedience, and then suddenly Mr. Osborne was there, saying that he was going to carry her somewhere. She put out her arms and clasped him round the neck, grateful for the chance to escape from her discomfort. He carried her easily and it was agreeable to be conveyed in this novel manner, even muffled in the folds of her eiderdown, but the journey was all too short. There was another bed, and although it had the prestige of being Mr. Osborne's own, it was still far too warm. But it was nice to be in such a large room and to have new things to look at. The familiar furniture seemed different from a different angle.

"Where's Mr. Osborne going to sleep?" she asked Francie when he had gone out. "In my room?"

"No, in the spare room."

"Oh. Why am I here?"

"Because it makes it easier for me to look after you if you cough in the night. I shall sleep in my own bed and I'll be beside you if you want me."

"That'll be nice." She sighed, half weary, half-satisfied. "Aren't I silly to be ill?"

"You can't help it, darling. It's just bad luck."

Francie judged it safe to leave her while she went downstairs to join Geoffrey for dinner. She was yawning with fatigue herself and he mixed her a weak whisky and soda to revive her.

"Are you going to let Mrs. Rawlings know about this?" he asked.

"I'll see how Doreen is in the morning. I don't want to worry the poor woman if there's no need. I sent her a card yesterday, just to tell her that Doreen had arrived safely." She yawned again.

"You'd better go to bed directly you've had coffee," Geoffrey said.

"I think I will."

Doreen was asleep when she went upstairs again and Francie, having undressed in the dark, thankfully closed her own eyes and almost at once was asleep too. She was woken some hours later by a low babble of sound. Doreen was talking in a rapid undertone. Her voice was peevishly distressed and slightly argumentative. Francie switched on her torch and crossed to the other bed. She lit the reading-lamp and placed it on the floor beside her, so that its light revealed Doreen without disturbing her. The child's breathing had become very laboured and her skin felt dry and scorchingly hot.

"I don't want to go in the tunnel," she protested. "It's stuffy and all dark. I don't want to go in the tunnel."

"All right, darling, you shan't go in the tunnel," Francie said soothingly. "We'll go another way."

"Another way?" Doreen echoed her.

"We'll go a nice way. Through the fields."

Doreen was silent for a moment. Then she moaned and shifted restlessly.

"They're sitting on me, Mum," she complained. "They're sitting on my chest."

"I'll make them get off," Francie reassured her. "There! They've gone now."

"Have they gone now?"

"Yes, they've gone right away."

But Doreen began to whimper.

"They're still there. They're sitting on my chest and it hurts. I can't breathe properly."

"Have a little drink, darling. That will send them away." She slid her hand under Doreen's head and held the glass to her lips. Doreen drank thirstily, then dropped her head back with a sigh that was almost a groan.

"I'm so tired. Prop me up, Mum."

"Just a moment, darling." Francie fetched the pillows from her own bed and crossed them behind Doreen's shoulders. "Is that better?"

"That's better. Can I have another drink?" This time she held the glass herself and looked at Francie over the rim with recognition. "I thought you were my Mum," she said drowsily. "What time is it?"

"After midnight."

"It's late," Doreen commented without interest.

"Look, darling, I am going to give you a dose of your medicine. Then you'll be more comfortable and you can go to sleep again."

"I don't want any medicine. It's beastly medicine."

"Yes, I know it is. But you're going to be a good girl and swallow it down."

Doreen submitted, as she always did to the note of authority, and presently she fell asleep again.

Missing her pillows and decidedly apprehensive, it was some while before Francie did the same.

She woke to daylight and the sound of Doreen's tortured breathing. "They," whom she had so lightly exorcised, were back again, their hands were round Doreen's throat, they had choked the bright colour into her face. Her agonised eyes stared out at Francie without recognition, but with a desperate appeal. Meeting them, Francie felt herself a murderess. While she had slept, Doreen had fought unaided with her stranglers.

Not stopping to put on her dressing-gown, she ran into Geoffrey's room and shook him awake.

"Come at once! She's much worse! She can't breathe!"

Geoffrey knew all about not being able to breathe, but he realised directly he looked at her that what afflicted Doreen was something other and worse than his own attacks of asthma. He thought that he knew, too, what that something was.

"I'm afraid she's developed pneumonia," he said quietly. "I'll phone Jones. Prop her right up in a sitting position and give her more air. Keep her warm and covered up too. And put on your dressing-gown."

He came back in a few minutes and put his arm round Francie's shoulders as she stood by Doreen's bedside, gazing at her with an agony of fear and tenderness.

"He's coming right away. He'll give her M. & B. I told him what we'd done and he said that that was quite correct. Better get dressed and have some coffee ready for him. It's only six o'clock. I'll stay here until you come back."

He drew up a chair and sat down by the bed. Last night when he had carried her from one room to the other, he had thought how pretty Doreen

looked, with the flushed cheeks and bright eyes of fever. She did not look pretty now, and he noted uneasily the bluish tinge of her lips. Groping gently for her hand under the bed-clothes, he felt the mad race of her pulse and had a strange vision of foam-flecked horses pulling chariots along a barren shore. Chariots by the sea! What an odd analogy and how remote from the thin little girl in the bed. He wondered in what way Francie and he had failed her. She had returned with a cold and now she had pneumonia, yet they had not neglected any symptom or treated her more casually than they would have done their own child. But she was heiress to a long line of men and women who had never had more than second-best in the material things of life and it was, perhaps, their dearth she suffered.

Reflecting this, he thought of Mrs. Rawlings. They would have to tell Mrs. Rawlings now. He greeted Francie with the words.

"She'll think it's my fault," Francie said miserably. "I ought to have stayed awake last night."

"Don't be silly, darling. I don't suppose Jones would have been over any earlier, in any case. He should have put her on M. & B. yesterday, as a precaution, it seems to me."

"How shall we let Mrs. Rawlings know?"

"I'll phone Helen before she leaves for the office. She'll have to do the dirty work. But first I'm going to get some clothes on."

Dr. Jones confirmed Geoffrey's diagnosis, but spoke reassuringly. Broncho-pneumonia was fairly common with children, he said, and there was no need for serious alarm. A great deal depended on the nursing.

"Mrs. Osborne is an excellent nurse, I'm sure," he said politely, "but she won't be able to manage

single-handed. Is there anybody in the village who could help her out?"

"I'd imagined we could get hold of a trained nurse. There's no one in the village."

"A trained nurse is out of the question, I'm afraid. They're desperately short-staffed even at the hospital. I can hold out no hope at all for a private patient."

"There's the child's mother," Geoffrey suggested. "I'm going to let her know, of course, and she may want to come down in any case."

"No one better," Jones said briskly, "if she's the sensible type."

"She's very sensible."

So when, later in the morning, Geoffrey telephoned his sister, it was to ask her to despatch Mrs. Rawlings, as well as to inform her. He made himself responsible for her expenses and also for the wages of anyone whom she could find to replace her temporarily at her work. There would be time enough later on to argue with Mrs. Rawlings' pride.

Francie was less frightened after the doctor had examined Doreen and administered the first dose of M. & B. She had been afraid that he was going to order oxygen, and this had always seemed to her a symbol of a desperate illness. But he contented himself with instructing her how to ease Doreen's breathing and to spare her exertion. Francie had made a good impression on him, for he recognised her conscientiousness and did not suspect to what extent she was emotionally involved.

When he had gone, Francie sat on by Doreen's bedside and imagined what Mrs. Rawlings was going to feel in an hour or so when Helen told her that Doreen had pneumonia and that she was to go at once to help nurse her. She imagined her first

panic reaction and then the confused misery of settling her affairs, packing and going to the station, the long suspense of the train journey and the momentary, terrifying suspense of her arrival at the house. She would come into the room and see nothing but Doreen's poor, flushed face. But Francie would speak to her quickly, repeating what the doctor had said, explaining what had been done. Perhaps she would scarcely listen at first, but after a while the meaning of the words would come through to her. They would do all they could to make it easier, though there was never very much that anyone could do.

Francie thought like this of Mrs. Rawlings, projecting herself into Mrs. Rawlings, evoking images of comfort and reassurance for Mrs. Rawlings, in order to comfort and reassure herself. She did this unconsciously, for it would have been no use to do it consciously. She transferred her own terror to Mrs. Rawlings as savages try to deceive evil spirits by jealously concealing their real names. For all the time at the back of her mind was the fear that Doreen might die.

The death of children had always held for her an almost morbid horror. Even to read of one in the obituary column saddened her profoundly — not so much on the child's account as on that of the people who had loved it. She could not believe that any lapse of time could obliterate such a grief. And now, although she told herself that Dr. Jones had not been in the least alarmist, had seemed, in fact, only mildly concerned, she remembered also that he was a young man and that he had not had the foresight to avert this serious development. He had written a useless prescription and talked about golf — it was not a basis for confidence. Ought they, perhaps, to call in a second opinion?

She felt that she could not bear the weight of further guilt.

But, by midday, Doreen seemed already a shade better. She breathed and coughed more easily and she no longer looked at Francie with the lack-lustre eyes of a stranger. She could not speak, but she seemed to find comfort in the support of Francie's arms and when she had taken a drink she would let her head sink back on Francie's shoulder with a touching dependence. Geoffrey stayed at home that day. He met the noon train, but Mrs. Rawlings was not on it; he had not really expected that she would be. At four o'clock he went down the hill to the station again; and this time Mrs. Rawlings walked through the barrier.

So it was not as Francie had imagined it at all. Not she but Geoffrey said the comforting and re-assuring things. Seated beside her in Truffitt's car, keeping his eyes averted from her stone-grey profile, he stumbled through the necessary explanations. She scarcely answered him. Her tension was like a third person sitting between them on the worn-out, musty-smelling upholstery of the car. It was her will, her urgency which drove the coughing engine up the long hill.

She was at his elbow as he opened the front door and half-way up the stairs by the time he had called out that Doreen had been moved into his own room. As she opened the door and walked towards the bed where Doreen lay, Francie stood up and her lips parted to speak. But seeing the expression on Mrs. Rawlings' face, she kept silent. She moved aside, and Mrs. Rawlings took her place.

CHAPTER XVIII

THAT first night, they both sat up with Doreen ; Mrs. Rawlings would not go to bed, but she was humbly conscious of her inexperience and far too much afraid of what might happen to want Francie to leave her to manage alone. They gave each other comfort and were friendly and considerate to one another. Doreen's paroxysms of coughing and the complete exhaustion which they caused her terrified them equally, but Francie was sustained by the realisation that Mrs. Rawlings was depending on her and had a touching faith in her ability to deal with the situation. Instructing Mrs. Rawlings, she gained confidence in herself and in her remedies — she believed in the relief that a poultice would bring, a dose of medicine seemed really to have a magic property. And Doreen, suffering, became at once the child of both and neither of them. Her thin little body was the battleground on which they fought her enemies; they had no time or inclination to fight battles with each other with Doreen as prize.

Doreen herself seemed to regard them without discrimination. She had cried a little when she first saw her mother, but afterwards she appeared to accept her presence unquestioningly and without particular emotion. Between her and the world of other people lay a thick mist of physical distress, and the sound of voices, the touch of hands had a certain unreality and lack of penetrative power. The bogies of her delirium were never far away and had more substance than her human ministrants. "They" were the pain in her chest and the choking in her

throat and the languor of her exhaustion. She fought them in loneliness, unconscious of allies and reinforcements.

At intervals throughout the night, Francie left the room to bring back something which Doreen needed or another pot of tea to help them keep awake. Twice Geoffrey's door opened and he came out to see what was happening. He was not sleeping very much himself, and when he slept he had bad dreams. Each time Francie was reassuring. There was nothing he could do, she said, he had better go back to bed. And there was in her voice the peculiar self-sufficiency and remoteness of night-watchers, who regard none but their fellow-watchers as equals in understanding and ability. Returning to Mrs. Rawlings from these expeditions, she felt towards her an increased alliance. They were conspirators, speaking in whispers. She was aware of Mrs. Rawlings' relief in welcoming her back. Almost, as the slow hours passed, they loved not only Doreen but each other.

Towards morning, Doreen slept for longer periods and Francie succeeded in persuading Mrs. Rawlings to lie down on the other bed and try to sleep too. Sitting in the arm-chair, by the shaded lamp, she found it very hard to keep awake herself. She felt the cold nausea of intense fatigue and the maddening irritation of the nerves which made it increasingly unbearable to remain in one position. She longed to walk up and down the room, to put her head out of the window and draw deep breaths. If Geoffrey were to come and speak to me now, she thought, I should be very disagreeable to him; and probably he wouldn't understand that it would only be because I love him so much; with anyone I loved less, I should have to be polite.

At six o'clock she heard him come out of his

room and a little later he opened the door and beckoned her on to the landing.

"I've run you in a bath; I thought you'd like that more than anything."

"Oh, Geoffrey, how wonderful of you! But I can't come now. They're both asleep."

"Damn. Can't you wake up Mrs. Rawlings?"

"I haven't the heart."

"Well, can't I take your place?"

She giggled a little hysterically.

"She'd be so shattered if she woke and found you there. She'd probably think it wasn't quite proper — especially with you in pyjamas and a dressing-gown."

"I don't care what she thinks."

But the murmur of their voices had already roused her. They heard the bed creak as she sat up, and Francie went back into the room.

"I'll take over now, Mrs. Osborne. You'd like to rest yourself."

She bent down stiffly to put on her shoes and, glancing in the mirror, made a perfunctory gesture of straightening her hair. She looked at that moment an old woman to be mother to so young a child.

"Doreen's been asleep since three," Francie said. "I think she's cooler, too."

They were suddenly a little shy of one another. The thread between them was still so tenuous that even the slightest change of atmosphere could sunder it.

"She's breathing easier," Mrs. Rawlings conceded. "Do I give her the medicine if she wakes?"

"Yes, it's due already. I'm going to have a bath now. I'll bring you some breakfast when I'm dressed again."

Geoffrey shaved while Francie took her bath. He was afraid of her falling asleep and drowning, he said.

"Are you and Mrs. Rawlings buddies now?" he asked.

"In a way, I think. She's stopped calling me m'am, anyhow. And she doesn't seem to blame me for Doreen being ill."

"I shall drop Jones a hint that he'd better make *that* quite plain. He's coming this morning, I suppose?"

"He said he was."

"I shall have to go to the office today, but I'll come home early. You and Mrs. Rawlings will have to do this nursing turn and turn about from now on."

"Yes. We'll make a time-table."

It was obvious when Doreen eventually woke that she was better, and the doctor confirmed this. Since it was easier for Francie to be available during the day, it was arranged that she should do the nursing then and that Mrs. Rawlings should take over at night. Soon it would not be necessary to remain with Doreen all the time or to sit up with her while she slept, and then they would be able to lead more normal lives. But for the moment they led a curious kind of Cox and Box existence, meeting and parting with almost professional briskness, scrupulously avoiding any interference with each other's duties or arrangements. Before Mrs. Rawlings handed over to Francie in the morning, she always swept and dusted Doreen's room, and before she reappeared at night, she cleaned her own. In return, Francie prepared meals for her on trays and made Geoffrey take her for a stroll round the garden before dinner. But neither of them sought or found again the mute alliance of that first shared vigil.

One afternoon, Mrs. Renshawe came to tea with Francie. She had telephoned her every day, she had shopped for her and once she had made a special

pilgrimage to cook the dinner, but this was the first time she had paid a purely social call since Doreen's illness. Francie had been reading to Doreen, sitting by the window where she could command a view of the drive and intercept Mac before he detected a visitor and barked. When Mrs. Renshawe turned the bend, she hurried down to meet her and to silence Mac.

"Come up and see Doreen," she suggested. "You'll be her first visitor."

Mrs. Renshawe said that she thought Doreen was looking very much better than she had expected.

"Her temperature's normal today so far," Francie announced proudly. "The doctor's only going to come and see her every other day now."

They stood at the foot of the bed and smiled down at her, and Doreen smiled back rather shyly, at once pleased and embarrassed at being the centre of adult attention. She had not noticed it when she was really ill; convalescent, she became self-conscious.

"She'll soon be up and about now," Mrs. Renshawe said encouragingly. "I must tell my hens to lay some eggs for her. She'll need building up. I've brought her the last pot of honey. I thought it might tempt her appetite."

When you were ill in bed, Doreen had discovered, people talked about you more than they talked to you. She wondered why this was. But she liked Mrs. Renshawe and she liked honey, and her smile brightened.

"That will be lovely for her," Francie said. "I'll give it to her for tea. We'll go and have our own tea now. You'll ring the bell if you want anything, won't you darling?"

Doreen was secretly rather pleased to be left alone. Since she had felt so much better, it had

been a subconscious restraint to know that every time she moved or murmured, by day or by night, either her mother or Mrs. Osborne would hasten to her side and ask solicitously if she wanted anything. When people watched you all the time, you felt as though they watched your thoughts. Not that Doreen knew very clearly what her thoughts were. But there was something that she wanted to remember, something that she had discovered or experienced within the past week which had since eluded her. It had to do with her reflection in the mirror.

It was only by chance that she had connected it with the mirror. Leaning a little sideways, she could just see her reflection in it where it hung on the wall. The first time she had done so, she had known at once that here was a clue, a thread to lead her back to what had been glimpsed and lost again. For the queer thing was, the face she saw looked unfamiliar, was not just the image of herself grown pale and large-eyed but the wrong face, not the one she had expected. Who, then, was she — Doreen Rawlings? What did it mean to think: I am Doreen Rawlings? Solemnly staring at the solemn-staring image in the glass, it seemed as though it meant nothing. She felt herself slipping away. In a moment she would remember. . . . But always, just on the brink of recollection, awareness came back into the eyes that stared out at hers — awareness and recognition. She was only herself after all, her pillows out of place, her arm aching where her weight had rested on it. This time, again, she had failed.

She did not have an opportunity to make the test today, because almost immediately after Francie and Mrs. Renshawe had left the room there was a knock on the door and Geoffrey came in. He was home early from the office. Doreen was very

pleased to see him, for he had only waved to her in passing since the day when he had carried her from her room to his own.

"I hear you're well enough to receive visitors," he said, sitting down on the chair beside her, "so I'm a visitor. How do you like my bed?"

"It's very nice. But I'd rather be up."

"Good heavens, you can't get up yet. You'd be falling about all over the place, as weak as a kitten."

"I'm going to have a kitten," Doreen announced. "And Mrs. Renshawe brought me a pot of honey. She keeps bees. Did you know?"

"Yes, I know. I'm thinking of keeping bees myself. Would you like to help me?"

"Oh no! Bees sting."

Geoffrey laughed.

"You really are the most shameless little coward about anything that bites or stings or scratches. Kittens scratch, you know."

But Doreen, who usually enjoyed being teased by Geoffrey about her shortcomings, was too newly convalescent to have any sense of humour and her eyes filled with tears. He saw them with alarm.

"Never mind," he said quickly. "I'll file its claws. We might paint them too, a nice red. Then it could wear a bow to match. What are you going to call it?"

"I don't know till I see what colour it is."

"You're quite right, of course. You might christen it Blancmange and then if it proved to be a tabby, you'd look silly. Or coal-bucket, and then it might be ginger."

"I wouldn't never call it Blancmange or Coal-bucket," Doreen protested indignantly, beginning to laugh.

"Why not? They're both very good names."

He pretended to call an imaginary kitten. "Blancmange! Blancmange! Don't you want your milk? Where are you, Coal-bucket? Come and catch this mouse!"

Doreen laughed more and more, until she began to cough and Geoffrey, feeling guilty, stopped clowning.

"I don't think I'm a very good sick-room visitor," he confessed. "I think I'm too noisy. I'd better go."

"Oh, don't go!" Doreen begged him.

"The day nurse might catch me. Or I might even wake up the night nurse."

"Mum says you showed her my garden," Doreen adroitly changed the conversation.

"Yes, I did. She thought you'd planted it very nicely."

"Mum never had a garden," Doreen said sadly. "But she doesn't mind. She doesn't like the country. She likes London."

"Don't you like London?"

"I like the Zoo," she conceded, after a moment's thought.

"Well, perhaps you could arrange to live in the Zoo," Geoffrey said, standing up. "In one of the cages. With the monkeys."

But he regretted his levity when Doreen answered simply;

"I'd rather live here with you."

She looked up at him with such untroubled confidence, with such a complete certainty of her welcome that he was touched and oddly shamed. He did not know why he should feel shamed, since he had never done anything to belie her faith; it was perhaps the shame of any adult when confronted with the trustfulness of any child. In the bantering currency of his habitual parley with her there seemed no adequate reply. He was compelled

to give her a brief, casual caress, smoothing back her hair, patting her cheek.

"Well, it's very nice to have you," he said. "It's time you had your tea. I'll see about that honey."

Alone again, Doreen leant back on her pillows, suddenly weary. The day seemed long and she was tired of being in bed. When would she be able to go back to school? She wanted to go back, to see the Warmans again and her teacher, but she felt that a world of experience divided her from them. It was another Doreen who had picked primroses in the wood, hardly more than a fortnight ago. There was a bowl of primroses on the table beside her. Lucy had gathered them for her. She had given *her* primroses to the lady in the train. All that seemed far away and unreal now. For some strange reason, it made her want to cry. It was as if the image in the mirror and the events of the past few days — meeting her father, going to London, being ill — combined to tell her something which she did not want to know. Something had changed. Something had gone. Even Mum was different.

She was disturbed, although not consciously, by the fact that her mother did not fit in, did not try to fit in. She was used to the idea that at home Mum kept herself to herself and that this, because Mum did it, was some kind of virtue. But she could not understand why her aloofness should continue here, in Mr. and Mrs. Osbornes' house. She wanted her mother to enjoy herself, to participate in the life of the household, and she was perfectly well aware that this was not happening. Mr. Osborne might take her for strolls in the garden, Mrs. Osborne might hold lengthy conversations with her about medicines and treatments, but she remained, obstinately, outside the circle. Yet inside the circle was so much warmth and happiness and

fun! Enclosed within it, warmed and happy and amused, Doreen looked out anxiously to catch her mother's eye, to seize her hand and draw her over the dividing line. But Mrs. Rawlings evaded her, as she evaded her host and hostess. This was not her world, she seemed to say; it would be undignified for her to pretend that it was. Let Doreen play there if she liked — she was only a child. Remaining at a distance, she conveyed an attitude of incuriosity, even of disapproval. It was almost as if she, not Doreen, were the evacuee.

At six o'clock, as usual, Mrs. Rawlings emerged from her room. She ate her evening meal with the Osbornes to simplify the housekeeping. This evening, having visited Doreen and assured herself that she was well enough to be left alone, she joined Francie in the kitchen. Lucy had gone home and Geoffrey was in his study.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Rawlings," Francie greeted her. She was always rather nervously formal with her, except in consultations at Doreen's bedside. "Did you sleep all right?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Doreen's made a big stride forward in the last twentyfour hours, hasn't she? I think the doctor will be pleased with her."

"Yes, she's on the mend now. It's about that I wanted to speak to you, Mrs. Osborne. I've been thinking — she don't really need the two of us to look after her now. I mean, it's enough for someone to be sleeping in the room with her, only needing to be up once or twice. It seems to me I can take over altogether now — night and day alike."

"You mustn't think I mind looking after her," Francie said quickly.

"I don't think that. But it's a tie and an inconvenience for you. I don't never want Doreen to

be a trouble, not more than she need be. I'd rather it were that way now, thank you all the same."

She sounded very sure of herself and quite unshakable. They both knew that she had reason on her side. But Francie felt a little sad, realising that she was to be displaced and in a measure exiled. It was because she loved Doreen that she was suspect. Strange to think that Mrs. Rawlings might have liked her better if she had loved Doreen less!

So Francie became a visitor as well as Geoffrey, and it was only rarely that she saw Doreen alone. There was a consultation with Mrs. Rawlings each morning about the patient's progress — for how long she should be allowed to sit out of bed today, what should she eat for lunch? — but apart from that an unspoken agreement existed that taking care of Doreen was Mrs. Rawlings' business now and that casual, uninvited appearances in her room were interferences with Mrs. Rawlings' programme and curriculum. Francie thought that Doreen's eyes followed her wistfully each morning when, the consultation over, she departed; but she never asked Francie to stay. Perhaps her mother had told her that Mrs. Osborne was busy, that she mustn't bother her? Yet she must know that Mrs. Osborne had not been too busy before. Only Geoffrey defied the tacit ban. Every evening when he came back from the office, he spent a quarter of an hour with Doreen, giving her the local news and teasing her into a state of animation. He took it for granted that Mrs. Rawlings would leave them alone together and she always did so. It seemed that she felt less distrust of him. It was certain that she liked him better.

"She can't always keep the child cooped up like this," Geoffrey told Francie. "Jones will want her to come downstairs soon, to sit out in the garden

when it's sunny. Her mother won't be able then to keep her out of circulation all the time."

"Perhaps we only imagine that she does now," Francie said doubtfully. "Perhaps I'm just being silly about it?"

Geoffrey thought privately that perhaps she was, though he did not say so. He had never shared Francie's awe of Mrs. Rawlings. But Francie remembered the guilt she had been made to feel when Mrs. Rawlings had come back from one of her rare excursions to the village to find her in Doreen's room. Doreen had been supposed to be asleep, but Francie had heard her fidgeting and coughing and had gone in. Immediately Doreen had ceased to cough and fidget and had greeted Francie with delight. Please, please, please would Mrs. Osborne have her tea with her today? But Mrs. Rawlings had come in and scolded her for not sleeping and Francie, by Implication, for encouraging her. Equally chastened, they had avoided looking at each other. Francie had left the room. But afterwards she had repented of her cowardice. Doreen had seemed lonely and almost feverishly glad to see her. She felt as if she had deserted her.

"You don't make enough allowance for Mrs. Rawlings' snobbishness," Geoffrey said judiciously. "She has a most conservative preoccupation with social distinctions."

Francie was suddenly indignant.

"I don't see that social distinctions have anything to do with children," she said crossly,

"But Doreen isn't just a child to Mrs. Rawlings," he pointed out reasonably. "She's *her* child."

Francie did not answer, and his words seemed to linger in the air, acquiring in the silence a portentousness which he had not intended. They raised an echo in the minds of both of them: "She's

her child . . . she's *her* child . . ." He became aware of Francie's inward mutiny and disappointment, and wished that he had left the phrase unsaid. Unintentionally, he had ranged himself on Mrs. Rawlings' side, against his wife. But was there any kindness in supporting her illusions? Better, he thought, that she should face the truth. Doreen's illness had only emphasised the issue. The happiness she brought them was a borrowed happiness. She was on loan to them, by courtesy of Mrs. Rawlings. And evidently Mrs. Rawlings did not mean them to forget it.

CHAPTER XIX

Mrs. Rawlings did not mean them to forget it. The hard, indisputable fact of ownership was her only reliable weapon, she felt. In the past two or three weeks, she had come to think in terms of weapons and defence. She felt herself driven into a corner, forced to give fight. It was only now, since she had realised the place Doreen occupied in this household, had watched her with the Osbornes and measured their concern with her, that she understood at last how serious their rivalry had become. The discovery was terrifying to her.

A little to her own surprise, she no longer resented Doreen's affection for the Osbornes. She had always liked Geoffrey and she was honestly grateful for his generosity. Against her will, she had grown to like Francie too ; she had not forgotten the vigil they had kept together on the night of her arrival and Francie's vagueness and timidity no longer irritated her. She understood very well the charm these people exercised over Doreen and the gifts they proffered. It was because she understood so well that she was so much afraid.

These people spoke a language which was foreign to her; but Doreen could interpret it. Their ways were unfamiliar to her; but Doreen was at home with them. They were courteous and kind in all their dealings with her; but it was only Doreen whom they really wanted. She had experienced in the past weeks a loneliness greater than any in her life before. She had been lonely when her husband had left her, but then she had had Doreen. She felt now that Doreen in her turn was leaving her, not in the same way but with a like finality.

The hardest thing to bear was the disappointment in Doreen's eyes, looking from her to Francie or to Geoffrey. Doreen had hoped, still hoped though with diminishing confidence, that by some act of will her mother could square the triangle. There were plenty of women, Mrs. Rawlings knew, who would very easily and promptly have insinuated themselves into this household, taking advantage of their host and hostess's affection for the child to claim an equal footing. But Mrs. Rawlings had a name for that kind of thing; that was "presuming". She wasn't one to push in where she wasn't really wanted; she had her pride. There was a little comfort to be found in the knowledge that Mr. Osborne, at least, appreciated and respected her for that. He recognised good manners when he met them.

Incredulously, Mrs. Rawlings reckoned the time that had elapsed since a white-faced, tearful Doreen had first parted from her in the hallway of the office, to be whirled away by taxi to Paddington; it was only seven months. Seven months in the life of a child of nine should not leave much mark. But on Doreen the imprint had been so profound and clear-cut that it seemed to her mother that in as many months again it might become indelible. The war was a long way from ending. Mrs. Rawlings

never doubted that it would be won. But what, to her, was the use of winning the war, if she had lost Doreen?

Some people, she thought (lying awake at night, stitching in silence by Doreen's bedside during the day), would say that she was selfish to argue the way she did; it was putting her own feelings before the child's real interests, they would say. But by her reckoning, the two were not opposed. This life, this easy, edgeless life, was only an interlude. The longer the interlude continued, the more difficult it would be for Doreen to adapt herself to actuality. Somebody had to teach her to stand up to people and hold her own, and her mother did not think that Mr. and Mrs. Osborne would be much use to her there. You could be as soft as you liked when you lived in a soft way — nobody shoved you and you didn't have to shove back. But in the real world, the world outside the park railings you needed to be hardier. If you were like Doreen, you needed it very much indeed.

Arguing, rationalising the pain in her heart, Mrs. Rawlings passed the hours and the days. Presently Doreen was fully convalescent. She was allowed first to dress, then to go downstairs, finally to take walks in the garden. Putting herself in the Osbornes' place, Mrs. Rawlings realised that soon they would wonder why she still remained. She could not any longer put off what she had to say.

She made an opportunity one evening when, against her custom, she followed Francie and Geoffrey into the drawing-room after dinner. If they were surprised, they did not show it. Geoffrey turned Mac out of an arm-chair for her to sit down, Francie asked if she had seen the paper. Mrs. Rawlings took the paper, glad of the cover it afforded her while she summoned her courage to speak. She needed courage, for she understood very well that

this was going to be a difficult conversation and she had never been a fluent talker.

Unwittingly, Geoffrey gave her an opening.

"I ran into Truffitt in the village," he remarked. "He says that if we get a doctor's certificate, we could hire him to take Doreen for a drive. I thought she'd like to go with you, Mrs. Rawlings, and show you the countryside. She's rather tied here, with the hill to tackle."

"Another week and she'll be well enough to tackle anything," Mrs. Rawlings said firmly. "She's on the mend now."

"Jones said today he wouldn't come again, Geoffrey," Francie put in. "He said it wasn't necessary."

"I must be getting back to my work," Mrs. Rawlings went on. She paused, and believed that she detected in the Osbornes' lack of comment the relief they would never obviously show. "I've written Mr. Scott today to tell him I'll be starting again next Monday." Fumbling with the newspaper, not looking at either of them she added: "I'll be taking Doreen with me when I go."

The silence which followed her words was not an ordinary silence. It was so complete, so bereft of anything to break it that she almost felt that what she had said was obscene, appalling, unspeakable. They had been taken utterly by surprise, were shocked into speechlessness. Against her reason and her will, she was made to feel guilty, and feeling guilty, anger grew in her as well.

It was Geoffrey who said at last, dryly and composedly:

"I hope you'll reconsider that, Mrs. Rawlings."

He knew that Francie had flashed at him a look of naked, desperate appeal, but he could not bring himself to return her look. He felt that he could

not bear to look at her at all, as if, by ignoring her, he could shield her from the eyes of an imaginary watcher before whom it was indecent she should show such pain. He talked to cover up her pain.

"After all," he went on calmly, reasonably, "she isn't very strong yet. A summer in the country —she'd run less risk of any trouble later on."

He thought that Mrs. Rawlings wavered in her resolve then, that a momentary indecision crossed her face. But Francie could not wait for it to crystallise.

"The raids," she broke in, in a frightened voice. "You couldn't take her back into the raids."

In that moment Mrs. Rawlings almost hated her.

She did not feel towards the raids as ordinary people felt. They did not frighten her in any personal way or rouse her to fury against the enemy. The raids were just part of the war, the most unpleasant part but something which had simply to be accepted and endured. The raids had taken Doreen away from her; that, for her, was their chief offence; and gradually, without knowing it, she had grown to associate the raids with the Osbornes, almost as if they were in some kind of collusion. Remote from bombs, the Osbornes seemed to her to reap the benefit of them. Defying the bombs, she defied the Osbornes. Nevertheless, a part of her mind, half rational, half superstitious, recognised the fact that it was wrong to expose Doreen to danger and that, however badly circumstances had turned out, she had been fundamentally right in sending her away. That part of her which was her conscience was uneasy and resented criticism. It was intolerable to her that the criticism, even if only implied, should come from Francie.

She said stiffly:

"I've not forgotten the raids, m'am. There's other arrangements I could make."

"But *why* are you taking her away, Mrs. Rawlings?" Francie cried, too moved to be afraid of her. "She's so happy here!"

Hesitating for a reply, Mrs. Rawlings fell back on the words her husband had used to her.

"It's not suitable," she said. And then, another tag coming to her aid, she added: "She's getting ideas above her station."

"That's a lot of nonsense," Geoffrey broke in almost angrily. "That sort of argument doesn't mean anything nowadays."

"Maybe not to you, sir," Mrs. Rawlings answered quietly, "but it works both ways. I've got to think of Doreen's future. I'm very grateful to you and Mrs. Osborne for all you've done for her; you couldn't have treated her better if she was your own child; but when I see the way she's settled down here — well, it frightens me. It's liable to make her very discontented when she comes home, that's how I see it. I can't give her all what you and Mrs. Osborne can. I'm not complaining of that and she's not either, not yet. But the longer she stops here, the more she's going to notice the difference. I don't reckon it's fair to let a child get discontented with the life it's got to lead."

Once again, Geoffrey was impressed with Mrs. Rawlings' superb dignity. He saw her, as he always saw her now, against the background of the sordid and abominable house in which she managed to exist with so much rectitude and self-respect, and he admired her even while he knew that he was going to fight her with all the skill he could command. He would fight her for Doreen's sake and (he hoped only secondarily) for Francie's. But he wished that they were on the same side.

"Look, Mrs. Rawlings," he said gently, "you've given us your point of view and I'll admit that there's

a lot to be said for it. But there's another way of looking at this thing, too. Doreen isn't quite an ordinary child. She's sensitive and intelligent, and very loyal and affectionate. I think she's grown very fond of my wife and me and we're all agreed that she's perfectly happy here, but you still come first with her, quite rightly, and you always will. Children, thank God, don't see things as materialistically as adults do. I mean, they're better judges of what's fundamentally important. As I see it, the war has given Doreen a chance to have certain advantages which all children ought to have — country air and a country life, first and foremost. London's a pretty beastly place for everyone just now, and any child is better out of it. And as for the other things we're lucky enough to enjoy ourselves and to be able to share with her—a comfortable home and a garden where she can run around — well, don't you think she's entitled to have any good thing in life that comes her way? Isn't any experience worth having which isn't harmful or unpleasant?"

Francie watched Mrs. Rawlings anxiously while he spoke. His arguments seemed to her unanswerable, and yet she did not think that Mrs. Rawlings would be convinced by them. Mrs. Rawlings had given reasons and Geoffrey had given reasons, but Francie knew that this was not really an affair of reason. It was instinct which motivated Mrs. Rawlings, and instinct was much stronger than logic and was little affected by it. She understood Mrs. Rawlings' instinct very well, better than Geoffrey could, and her heart sank.

But Geoffrey thought that Mrs. Rawlings's silence meant that his words had made an impression on her and, anxious lest Francie should break in again and say the wrong thing, he went on:

"Think it over, won't you? There's no need to come to any hasty decision. You've got three days in which to consider the matter."

"I have thought it over, sir," Mrs. Rawlings stood up. "It's come as a surprise to you, but I've been thinking of it for a long time now. I shan't change my mind." She moved to the door. "Good-night, m'am. Good-night, sir."

As the door closed behind her, there was a moment's silence, then Geoffrey swore.

"Hell! That was a bombshell. I don't believe she will change her mind, either."

Francie began to cry.

"Oh Geoffrey, she isn't well enough to go! And to take her back to London — to the raids and that awful slum!"

"Yes, poor kid. I'm surprised that any mother who's so obviously devoted should behave so selfishly."

"But don't you see — she's frightened, she's terribly frightened. It's turned out just the way that Helen said it would. If anything happens to Doreen, I'll be the one who's really to blame."

"Darling, don't talk rubbish," Geoffrey said impatiently. "For God's sake, don't get melodramatic about this."

"I'm not getting melodramatic. But I do think it's my fault, in a sort of way. If I hadn't been so pleased to have her, if I'd just been conscientious and a bit bored, Mrs. Rawlings wouldn't have minded her staying here, she wouldn't have been jealous. She's only taking her away because she's jealous and afraid. All that she said about Doreen 'getting ideas above her station', that was only to convince herself. She only minds because we love her and Doreen loves us."

"That's too damn subtle for me," Geoffrey muttered untruthfully. "I see it simply as a social problem."

But although he was not going to encourage Francie in a morbid frame of mind by agreeing with her, he felt wryly that she had probably hit the nail

on the head. Not one of them, he reflected with dispassionate shame, had honestly put Doreen first. Yes, Mrs. Rawlings had, in the beginning, when she had consented to her leaving London, but she had not been able to sustain her sacrifice. Helen had intervened only to ease her conscience. Francie had welcomed not Doreen but the child whom she had never had. And he? He who had failed to give his wife a child, had smugly used another woman's child as substitute. Poor Doreen, he thought bitterly; you deserved better of us than that.

"She hasn't told Doreen yet," Francie went on with her own thoughts. "When I went up to say good-night to her, she didn't know, I'm certain."

Silent again, she remembered the little scene which was so nearly the same every evening, so familiar and so much valued. First, the brief conversation, about the events of the day gone by and those of the day to come; then, her own determined move to leave, Doreen's last ruse to keep her just a little longer, and finally the quick, warm hug of parting, Doreen's thin arms about her neck, the feel of Doreen's young face against her own. What was she going to do with her days when Doreen was gone? she cried out inwardly. How could she fill their emptiness? A child in the house was its focal point; everything else radiated from it. But without that focal point, the pattern was lost, the lines ran straight and grooved. You cooked meals and ate them and washed the dishes; you cleaned rooms, cut flowers to decorate them and threw them away when they died. And every day you died a little too. There was no continuing life in a house without children.

Perhaps it would have been better if Doreen had never come. But she did not really think that.

"Want to hear the nine o'clock news?" Geoffrey asked.

He switched on without waiting for her to reply. The Greeks were going under and the Yugoslavs; Tobruk was besieged; there had been a very heavy raid the night before on London. They listened in silence without comment, avoiding each other's eyes.

CHAPTER XX

When she came to pack, Mrs. Rawlings had to borrow a suitcase. She possessed only one; her own clothes had had to be transported in brown-paper parcels; and Doreen's belongings, the accumulation of even so few months, could no longer be contained in the luggage she had brought with her. Her books, her puzzles, her games — the prized litter of pressed wild flowers, foreign postage stamps, fossils dug up in the garden and almost unidentifiable odds and ends —took up far more space than her meagre wardrobe. Mrs. Rawlings did not dare suggest that any of them should be left behind. Her manner towards Doreen in the past twenty-four hours had become curiously mollifying, almost humble. She was very much aware that she had made on Doreen's love for her the greatest demand of her life.

Yet, when she had told her that they were going back to London, together, Doreen had seemed to take the fact surprisingly calmly. She had turned very pale but it was as though she had been half expecting it, and were already half resigned. She did not weep; she did not protest; but Mrs. Rawlings felt neither triumphant nor reassured. There was a quality in Doreen which had always baffled her. She could never be quite sure what Doreen was thinking.

Her strangest reaction was a deliberate avoidance of the Osbornes. She seemed self-conscious and embarrassed in their company and if she were left alone with them for even a moment would make an

excuse to slip away. They did not try to detain her. They were embarrassed too. For what could they say in sympathy with Doreen which would not be a criticism of her mother?

Mrs. Rawlings packed on Saturday, to catch a train on Sunday morning. She knelt on the floor in a halo of spring sunshine. Sitting on the bed beside her, listlessly swinging her legs, Doreen watched in silence while her pile of treasures gradually diminished. Her silence and her watchfulness grated on Mrs. Rawlings's nerves.

"For goodness' sake, go off and play in the garden," she commanded. "I promise you I'll not leave anything behind."

Immediately, obediently, Doreen left the room. She went down the stairs very slowly, listening for the sound of voices or movement. But all was quiet, all was still. The side-door was unlocked. She went out into the garden.

There was no one in sight. Round the corner of the house, Mr. Osborne would be working on the vegetables, but he would not be able to see her from there. By skirting behind the rockery, she could reach the tool-shed unobserved. She could say good-bye to the tool-shed unobserved.

It had always been her favourite playground. In years to come, although she did not suspect it now, she would never be able to enter an ironmonger's or walk through the gardening department of a multiple store without experiencing a nostalgic ache for it. She liked its smell, its orderly litter, the queer objects she was always finding unexpectedly which gave it a spice of mystery. Over in one corner, furled and still elegantly new, stood the tent Mr. Osborne had given her at Christmas. Her mother had not mentioned it and neither had she. She thought of it as a hostage, a pledge that one day she would come

back. Even if she had to wait till she was grown up. . . . It did not occur to her that by then she might no longer want to play with it, nor did she visualise Francie and Geoffrey as becoming any older. She only knew that by believing fiercely that she would eventually return, it might be possible to bear the immediate parting. Not otherwise. All the colour and gaiety and breathing-space of life seemed contained in this house and this garden. Going back to Dakers Place was like re-entering a box. The lid would close. Daylight would be blotted out.

She did not think of her mother as a responsible agent in this matter or feel aggrieved towards her. She did not even wonder very much why the decision to remove her had been taken, although she was perfectly well aware that the Osbornes had had no part in it. Nothing had been the same since the day she had picked the primroses and found her father waiting for her when she came back to tea. In that moment there had closed round her again the mysterious, terrifying world of adult emotions and recriminations. Dimly she perceived that what she was losing now was not just people whom she loved and a way of living which had brought her happiness; she was losing her last opportunity to remain a child. The fact that her mother treated her as more of a child than the Osbornes did had, curiously, nothing to do with it. Growing up was not conditioned by the time you went to bed. Growing up was finding out that grown-ups suffered.

But on the surface Doreen was only thinking that she might never be able to play in the tool-shed again. She sat on the blackened section of tree-trunk which was used for chopping wood and bore a thousand criss-crossed scars, and tried to memorise the look and position of every object there. It was thus that Francie found her.

She had been looking for her. She could not endure that Doreen should leave in the morning in the same tense, evasive silence of the past two days. Suppose Mrs. Rawlings had told her that they *wanted* her to go? Geoffrey said that this idea was nonsense and highly insulting to Mrs. Rawlings, but Francie could not feel so sure. They had behaved very fairly to Mrs. Rawlings, she considered, but there was a limit to forbearance. She did not believe that it would make life any easier for Doreen to imagine that the people she had loved had not loved her.

Doreen glanced up when Francie entered and her eyes filled with tears. They looked at each other for a moment without speaking, then Doreen flung herself weeping into Francie's arms. Muffled against Francie's ribs, her sobs made little sound, but her body shook with their violence. Moved and almost frightened by the child's emotion, Francie held her tightly, murmuring endearments at random. She did not know what to say. There was obviously no need at all to reassure Doreen that they were sorry she was going. It seemed more important to comfort her distress.

"It isn't for ever, darling," she promised recklessly. "Perhaps next year your mother will let you come and stay with us in your summer holidays. You know we shall always want you here."

"Will you miss me?" Doreen entreated, ignoring the promise as though she knew, as though they both knew, that it was only made to console her.

"Of course I shall! We both shall. We'll miss you terribly." She hugged her closer.

"You won't have another little girl to stay?" Drawing back a little, she stared up anxiously into Francie's face.

"Never!" She said it with so much passion with such a tone of recoil that Doreen was satisfied

"I want to be your little girl always," she pleaded. "I want to stay here always."

She broke off, suddenly aware of what she had said. Francie did not answer and the pause that followed was constrained for both of them. It was Francie who spoke first.

"Your mother would be very lonely if you stayed here always," she said soberly. "After all, I've got Mr. Osborne, and Mac, and . . . well, lots of things. Your mother only has you."

Doreen sighed, a sigh that was older than her years.

"Yes, Mrs. Osborne," she whispered.

"I think it's done you good being here," Francie went on bravely, using the arguments with which she tried to comfort herself. "Even though you've been ill, I think you look better than when you came. And you've learnt a lot of new things and you've been out of the raids . . ." Her voice shook suddenly.

"I don't mind the raids, Mrs. Osborne," Doreen said gently, consoling in her turn. "At least, not much. Mum wouldn't never let me be hurt in the raids."

Pray God, no, Francie petitioned inwardly.

"But it's nice here," Doreen continued wistfully. "Even if the raids was here, I'd like it better than London. I like this tool-shed," she confessed. "This is my favourite place of all."

"Is it, darling?" Francie was able to smile. "I wonder why?"

"It's like a little house. I like my own room, too. And my garden. Will Mr. Osborne keep my garden separate?"

"I'm sure he will."

"He'll miss me helping him in the garden," Doreen said with melancholy satisfaction. "I was

going to thin the onions for him, because my fingers are smaller and I haven't got so far to bend."

Her tears had dried and she felt better now that they had fallen.

"Mac'll miss me too, because I'm the only one that throws stones for him. But Lucy won't miss me much, because she forgets things so quickly."

Francie realised that she was listening to thoughts which had been meditated very deeply. She listened with a fixed and painful smile.

"But you're the one who'll miss me most," Doreen finished almost matter-of-factly. "And I'll miss you most, too."

With a swift, passionate movement she threw her arms about Francie again, lifting her face to be kissed. This was their real farewell and they both of them knew it. No subsequent, public farewell would have the same significance. In spite of all her resolution, Francie felt tears running down her cheeks.

"Go and talk to Mr. Osborne, darling," she entreated in a choked voice. "I'll stay here for a little while."

Obedient to her last as to her first request, Doreen left the tool-shed. She had forgotten for the moment that she was saying good-bye to that also.

Geoffrey was raking over a bed and did not look up or greet her as she approached. She stood and watched him in silence, an easy, familiar and companionable silence. It gave her an indefinable pleasure to see how fine he raked the soil, almost to the consistency of sand. When at last he was satisfied that no stone or clod remained, he pegged in a line one side and tossed her the other end.

"Stick this in your side, will you? Does it look straight to you?"

Doreen squinted along the line.

"A bit more to the left," she pronounced, shifting the peg. "It's all right now."

"Well, draw me out a drill, will you? Quite shallow — it's for carrot seed."

"May I put in the seed?"

"If you want to. But don't sow it too thickly."

He watched her a moment and then strolled away to another bed. Proud and responsible Doreen moved down the row. When the carrots came up, she reflected, Mr. Osborne would remember that she had sown them. She worked slowly and carefully, dropping in the seeds almost one by one. She wanted them to come up well and evenly.

Half-way down the row, her mother called to her from the bedroom window. Doreen looked across at Geoffrey.

"Off you go," he said. "I'll finish the job."

It was disappointing. Perhaps he would forget which end she had begun. She walked across the garden with lagging steps. The tool-shed was empty — Mrs. Osborne must have gone back into the house. But Doreen did not see her as she reluctantly mounted the stairs. Entering the bedroom, she remembered that she had been crying and that it might show. She did not want her mother to guess that she had cried. She felt that they had been disloyal tears.

"I want you to put on the clothes you'll be travelling in," Mrs. Rawlings said. "I've got to pack the ones you're wearing."

The end was very near now.

"Can I go back in the garden, Mum?" she asked when she had changed.

"Not now you can't. You'll only mess yourself up." And then remembering, she added almost coaxingly: "It's nearly time you had your supper, anyhow, love."

Doreen did not answer. She was looking out of the window. There, below her, was Mr. Osborne finishing the carrot row. She saw him shake the light, feathery seeds into the palm of his hand and felt them in her own palm. It came to her with a wave of extreme desolation that she might never again walk down the neat, straight paths of the vegetable garden, never again bend over the goldfish pond, never again step perilously from one stone to another in the rockery or wincingly paddle her feet in the cold, dark, overgrown stream. In summer, Mr. Osborne said, dragon-flies bred by the stream and swooped and darted over the water when the sun came out. She might never see the dragon-flies now.

There was a tap on the door. Mrs. Rawlings called out: "Come in," and Francie entered. She had changed her dress and made up her face with unusual care. She was smiling.

"Doreen, I want to talk to your mother for a moment," she said lightly. "Run along, will you?"

Doreen gave one swift, uneasy glance from Francie to her mother and went out without a word. As the door closed behind her, Francie went on immediately, in the same, light, placatory tone:

"It was only to ask you, Mrs. Rawlings, if you'd mind if Doreen sat up for dinner with us tonight? I thought . . . well it would be nice to give her a last little treat."

Mrs. Rawlings' expression, which had been rigidly defensive, relaxed. Although she would never have admitted it, she felt a grudging admiration for the tact of the suggestion. She too had not been looking forward to this last evening. You never knew with children . . . She dreaded Doreen's tears.

"If it's not putting you out, m'am. I've no objection."

"That's good." Francie smiled again. "I'll tell my husband."

But she did not at once leave the room. It was the first opportunity she had had since Mrs. Rawlings' announcement of her departure to speak to her in private and she felt that perhaps she ought to take it. In spite of her timidity, she was fundamentally an honest woman and it seemed to her that by keeping silent, she shirked an issue. It might be that with Mrs. Rawlings she had always shirked the issue.

So now, standing her ground, her smile gone, she asked:

"Do you mean this to be for ever, Mrs. Rawlings? Are we never to be allowed to invite Doreen for a visit or see her again?"

There was that in her voice which dispelled Mrs. Rawlings's suspicions, a sincerity which she recognised and respected. She paid it the compliment of an equal sincerity.

"It won't be my wish that she sees you again, Mrs. Osborne. I'm one that holds with making a clean break of things. It'd only unsettle her."

"Why are you *really* taking her away?" Francie asked gently.

Mrs. Rawlings did not answer immediately. She went on folding Doreen's garden coat, without looking at Francie.

"If you was to put yourself in my place," she said at last, "you wouldn't need to ask that. We've all got a right to have something out of life, haven't we? I reckon you sometimes envy me Doreen. Well, there's things I envy you. You've got a nice way with you, you and Mr. Osborne. That means more to Doreen than all this." She made a gesture with her hands that embraced the room, the house, a whole world of material objects. "That's something I can't give her, try as I would. I haven't had the

education for it ; I never got the chance. But I do the best I can. She'll always have the best I've got to give. And which of us two is the one to be envied — well, that's for time to show."

"Yes, that's for time to show," Francie repeated after her, with an unconscious sigh. "Thank you for speaking to me like that. I believe I understand better than you think I do. We'll see you both at dinner, then." She went out of the room.

Doreen heard her go. She had hidden in her own small bedroom, in which she had not slept since the evening Geoffrey had carried her from her bed to his. Under her counterpane the blankets were folded into humps ; nothing hung behind the curtain but the Osbornes' coat-hangers ; there was dust on the books which had belonged to Mrs. Osborne when she was a child. Doreen had grown accustomed since her illness to sharing a room with her mother again, but there was a pang in the thought that nobody now would knock on a door and wait until she said "Come in". Here, in this room, she had advanced a little way into maturity and the lonely delights of personal sanctuary. There was not much personal sanctuary to be found in Dakers Place.

Hearing Mrs. Osborne come out of the adjoining room, she was afraid to go back herself, afraid of what she might find, of an atmosphere. But when she finally summoned courage to return, she was surprised and relieved to be greeted with the news that, as a special treat, she was to stay up to dinner with the grown-ups. Her mother even smiled as she told her.

Everyone tried very hard during dinner, Doreen included. They were rewarded presently by a perceptible lightening of all their spirits. Feigning ease and enjoyment, they almost inadvertently created

them. Geoffrey was sufficiently encouraged to suggest that they might round off the evening with a game of Ludo. Doreen instantly looked at her mother to see how she would take this revolutionary idea and, to her surprised delight, Mrs. Rawlings did not object. It was as if, at last, she felt secure enough to make concessions.

Almost at once, Geoffrey began to cheat — so flagrantly and shamelessly that most of Doreen's time was occupied in watching and denouncing him. Flushed with amused indignation, her voice rose to a squeak, her laughter became infectious. She scarcely noticed her mother or Francie, even the fate of her own counters was secondary to Geoffrey's grave-faced clowning. And when finally, elated with the triumph of having fairly beaten him in the last lap, her mother announced that she must go to bed at once, she found herself kissed good-night and sent upstairs before she had had time properly to realise the significance of the farewells. Only when she was alone did she begin to feel bewildered and a little duped. The grown-ups had sunk their differences to form a solid front against her, for her own good. It was a lonely thought. Some of the tears she wept into her pillow were because of that too.

CHAPTER XXI

TURNING away from the gate as the car drove off down the hill, Francie thought that now she must begin pretending that none of this had ever happened. She must try to remember her life as it had been before Doreen came and start again from there. But she wished that, just for a little while, she could be alone. When she was sad, it saddened Geoffrey too. It would be easier to start again if somebody who loved you

weren't watching all the time. Walking back to the house by Geoffrey's side, she was conscious of the image of Doreen between them. Smiling at him in reassurance, she felt as though she had denied a ghost.

Geoffrey thought that presently, but not now, he would make the suggestion he had been revolving in his mind for the past six months: they ought to adopt a child. There must be plenty of children doubly orphaned in this war. It would be best to choose an infant. He didn't care for infants, but it would be best for Francie. She was taking this parting badly, more badly than she meant to own. That was because she was afraid of hurting or humiliating him. But he was not deceived.

Sitting in the train opposite Doreen, Mrs. Rawlings relaxed a little. She had not realised before how strung up she had been. Most of her battles had been lonely battles, but this had been the loneliest of all. She hadn't acted any too soon, she told herself. Another few months and the harm would have been done. She tried to catch Doreen's eye to give her a smile, but Doreen was staring out of the window. Her child's face still indeterminate in features, looked curiously shuttered and reserved. And watching her, Mrs. Rawlings felt as though a hand had squeezed her heart. Perhaps it was already too late.

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